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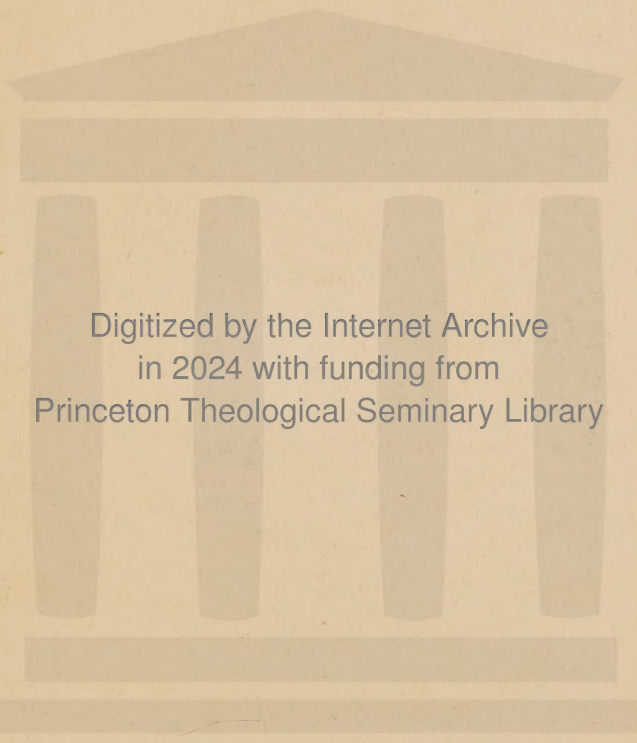




HISTORY OF  
SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL







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SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL



# HISTORY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

FOUNDER OF THE  
CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION  
(VINCENTIANS)

AND OF THE  
SISTERS OF CHARITY

✓  
BY MONSEIGNEUR BOUGAUD  
BISHOP OF LAVAL

TRANSLATED FROM THE SECOND FRENCH EDITION BY THE  
REV. JOSEPH BRADY, C.M.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HIS EMINENCE  
THE CARDINAL ARCHBISHOP OF WESTMINSTER

VOL. I

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## INTRODUCTION

FATHER BRADY has been well advised in presenting the English-reading public with a translation of Bougaud's Life of Saint Vincent de Paul. A larger and more detailed Life of the saint was published by his contemporary, Abelly, Bishop of Rodez, and there are in addition the volumes of the saint's correspondence, made up of 2500 letters, out of about 30,000 which were in existence at the time of his death in 1660. These publications form a mine of precious ore, to which Bishop Bougaud is mainly indebted for his facts ; and they will always live as the *pièces justificatives* of the biographer, and the primitive sources to which the devout student and follower of the saint will delight to have recourse. But the Bishop has placed modern society under a signal obligation to his labours, because knowing intimately the temper and taste of the present generation, he has provided a biography which, both in style and form, is such as people love to read. It is not so short as to be jejune and lifeless, nor is it so minute and long as to weary those who are not devoured by a thirst to know everything, even to the smallest details, connected with the history of this great modern saint.

Bishop Bougaud's biographies of Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, of Saint Monica, and of Saint Vincent de



Paul are literary masterpieces, and the translation of this last enriches our English religious literature with a most valuable addition.

But I welcome its publication at the present time for another reason—its opportuneness. A twofold work is before the English-reading Catholics of the world, upon the faithful execution of which must depend the influence they will eventually exert upon society. That work consists in nothing less than a reform of society, and the elevation and sanctification of the priesthood. This is the work before the Church at the present time everywhere, and therefore here. It is a double work, that appeals, or ought to appeal, to every instructed Catholic. It forms the burden of Papal encyclicals, it is the end aimed at by the decrees of Diocesan and Provincial Synods, it is the constant study and labour of bishops.

The seventeenth century no doubt differed vastly from our own, but not to the extent that may be supposed. It forms part of that modern period of which the present day is the outcome. The problems undergoing study and solution are in large measure the same. Among the many saints and great Christian leaders of the Church in the seventeenth century, Saint Vincent de Paul stands out pre-eminent as an apostle of charity and an educator of the clergy. His long life of devotion to the service of his neighbour is a model for our imitation.

The social difficulty with which we are face to face has been created by the substitution of capital as a

governing power for Christianity. The working classes, or "the hands," as they have been called, have been treated simply as so much wealth-producing power ; and the rich and the poor have been banded into two opposite camps. Luxury, selfishness and power combine and struggle for the mastery. The working classes have silently realised their position. They herd for the most part together ; they live as tenants on the land or in the tenements of absentee landlords, whom they seldom or never see. The absence among them is not only of the wealthy landlord, but of the civilising, humanising, Christianising influence of those who by education are refined, cultivated, charitable, and religious. The working classes are learning to combine, in order to secure for themselves by pressure and threats that which ought to have been spontaneously offered to them by Christian sentiment. In the long-run, it will be found that the power of capital is a miserably inefficient substitute for Christianity, and that it will be destroyed by the combination of numbers, and by its own corruption, unless there be a return among all classes to Christian principle.

We are witnesses here in England of an extraordinary movement, brought about by a recognition of the fact that there are immense social dangers ahead, and that the rich have duties and the poor rights that cannot be for ever laid aside. Hence there has sprung up a spirit of philanthropy, dispensing money and personal service, which is endeavouring to remedy the evil created by the absence of practical Christianity. It

is good, so far as it goes ; it is an imitation by the natural man of that which is supernatural and divine ; but it cannot be expected to do the work of Christianity, which alone is capable of regenerating and elevating the human race. It is in silent and unconscious league with that naturalism of the day which affects to raise mankind to a higher level, and to secure the human happiness of society, without recourse to and dependence on doctrines of revelation—grace, humility, the presence of Christ in the soul, the power of sacraments, the influence of prayer, the sanctity of the Christian life, and the close personal relationship which our Divine Redeemer wished to establish between all His true followers.

Saint Vincent de Paul dealt with the whole range of human misery and suffering—from the case of the foundling to that of poverty-stricken old age—from the instruction of children to the care of the insane. He organised women of the highest ranks of society, of the middle class, and even of the lower. He formed them into bands and associations to deal with every form of destitution and suffering. The Ladies of Charity and the Sisters of Charity were the most remarkable among these. “He covered France with schools for the poor, and taught the daughters of the rich and noble to abandon home and pleasure to consecrate themselves to the education of their less fortunate brethren. But even all this was not enough for him, though it was the maximum for the so-called philanthropists. There was one step more, one higher aim, namely, to care, to teach, to guard the immortal soul,



and bring it safely back to Him from whom it came. To feed the body was good, to enlighten the mind was better, but above and before everything else, in the eyes of Saint Vincent de Paul, was to purify, to guard, to save the soul. Even from this height he looked higher still, and saw, clothed in the rags of the poor, the person of his Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. He used to say, 'I must not judge poor people according to their exterior or according as they speak, for often they are far from what they seem. Let us judge them by the light of faith, and we shall see in them the Son of God, who wished to be poor, who in His Passion lost almost the appearance of a man, who appeared a fool to the Gentiles, a stumbling-block to the Jews.' "

Here then is the patron and the model that the upper classes need to place before themselves for imitation in their dealing with the poor. Here is the distinctive work set before Catholic men and women of the upper or cultivated classes. This work, this spirit, is something altogether different to the philanthropy which rules those kindly men and women who are not professedly governed by the Gospel.

We have for many years had the Sisters of Charity at work in England. But the Ladies of Charity have not yet been popularised. In Manchester they exist, and their work has taken root under the fostering care of Canon Richardson during the last ten or twelve years. There is plenty of material out of which they might be formed in all our large centres of population. In London there are noble bands of ladies doing work which would

have rejoiced the heart of Saint Vincent, and doing it absolutely animated and urged on by the spirit which he used to inspire. The Duchess of Newcastle with her brave companions on Tower Hill ; Lady Margaret Howard's settlement in Mile End ; Lady Edmund Talbot's in the Far East ; Lady Denbigh, Miss Streeter, Miss Kirwan, Miss Elliot, Miss Stafford, Miss Ray, Miss Burke, and a hundred other ladies connected with the Catholic Social Union in other parts of London, are in reality doing the work of the Ladies of Charity. All of these will welcome the Life of Saint Vincent de Paul, who has been universalised by the declaration of the Holy See that he is "the patron of all works of charity."

In addition to the Ladies, we have the Brothers of Saint Vincent de Paul, under their new president, the Marquess of Ripon. These have a similar work before them, and their desire is to walk in the very footsteps of Saint Vincent. The one need is to multiply their numbers. All of these know full well that the reforming of modern society must come from within, that is, by inspiring it with the Divine Spirit, who alone can save it from corruption. Nothing could be happier for the Brothers than to be marshalled in this mission, and encouraged and taught by Saint Vincent de Paul.

I would gladly pursue this theme, but the limits of an Introduction warn me to be brief. There is, however, one other feature of Saint Vincent's mission to the Church on which I will venture to offer an observation, and on account of which I welcome this Life as oppor-

tune. He was in his day one of the chief reformers of the clergy ; and remarkable as he was for his deeds of charity, he was none the less remarkable for the care which he devoted to the education and the formation of priests and bishops. Here again his example is specially opportune. The Church in England is deeply solicitous for the training of her clergy. All our efforts, all our expenditure upon churches, schools and institutions will be as nothing if the priesthood prove not to be at the height of its vocation. There are many dangers that infest us—assimilation to the world, a worldly spirit, love of ease and comfort, a low standard of conduct. These open the soul to the influence of human passions, and quench the Spirit of God. Neglect of prayer and of mortification, and the substitution of the life of sense and of reason for the life of faith, destroy entirely the savour of the salt. The future of the Catholic Church in England, the whole progress of religion, depends upon no one thing more than upon the apostolic spirit of the priesthood. There is no thought, no aim, no prayer that ought more completely to engross the attention of bishops than the raising of their young clergy to a high intellectual and spiritual standard. It is for this purpose that the English bishops have concentrated their attention upon forming common seminaries, which they desire to place in the immediate charge of men who shall be models of devotedness and self-sacrifice, as well as learned and capable as teachers. This Life of Saint Vincent de Paul will, therefore, be of value to bishops, superiors, and



ecclesiastical students, because it contains so much that directly concerns the training and mission of the priesthood. It will be of use also to the devout laity if it incite them also to address frequent and fervent prayer to God for the sanctification of the clergy. *Sicut populus sic Sacerdos.* If the fathers and mothers of families form a high ideal of the priesthood, if they inspire it into their children, if they foster it during the years of the education of their sons, they will render incalculable service to the Church. Indeed it is not too much to say, that it is most desirable that the Catholic laity should exact a high standard of perfection from the clergy, because they will thus form a wholesome and stimulating public opinion that will help to sustain the priesthood in its perfection. Now, from no biography will they better learn what the priesthood ought to be than from the Life of Saint Vincent de Paul.

HERBERT CARDINAL VAUGHAN.

FEAST OF SAINT JOSEPH,  
MILL HILL, 1899.

# PREFACE

## TO THE FRENCH EDITION

BY

MONSEIGNEUR LAGRANGE

BISHOP OF CHARTRES

MGR. BOUGAUD, late Bishop of Laval, a see, alas! occupied by him too short a time, is undoubtedly a great hagiographer, but more especially an apologist. His earlier lives of the saints—Saint Jane Chantal, Saint Monica, and Blessed Margaret Mary—are works of an apostolic character. The lives of saints are written with the view to making saints, or, at least, to cultivating piety and Christian virtue. To Mgr. Bougaud's mind a saint's life was also a vindication of Christianity from its results, according to our Lord's words: "A tree is known by its fruits." The great work, however, which he had always in view, and which he intended to be the principal task of his life, was an apology, properly so-called. That, after many years of labour, he accomplished, and it shall always be regarded as his chief work.

*Christianity and the Present Age* is the title of this vast apology. It consists of five volumes, which appeared one after the other—successive parts of a

structure, whose erection was watched with increasing interest, and whose completion was hailed with widespread admiration. Mgr. Bougaud's method is that of our theologians. But what is peculiar to him is his manner of treating dogmatic questions, and of adapting them to the spiritual wants of his contemporaries. The author's art and style enabled him, as when speaking, to touch the heart. For this reason we can say, notwithstanding the great names of our modern apologists, that Mgr. Bougaud's work is in the first rank; and when a priest nowadays seeks for the most useful book to place in the hands of men of the world to reanimate their faith, he almost always selects *Christianity and the Present Age*.

After completing this dogmatic work, so great that it seemed to put into the shade the hagiographical works of our illustrious author, Mgr. Bougaud did not feel that he ought to lay aside his pen. Naturally a hard worker, he had not been idle during the eighteen years he spent at Orleans with the Bishop, who perhaps was one of the most laborious men of his time. Reverting then to his original idea of vindicating Christianity by its saints, he looked into that long roll of heroes to find what name he might, with the greatest profit, hold up before the present age, in order to attract and win it. After at first thinking of Saint Louis—a great king as well as a great saint, and a great king because a great saint—he determined, however, upon another name more modern, and which, in truth, more directly appeals to the spirit of the times—Vincent de Paul. He it was who, in the seventeenth century, seems to have been the precursor

of the great works, the fulfilment of which the Church regards as her mission in the nineteenth.

The nineteenth century is democratic ; democracy holds the field, as Royer-Collard says. Nowadays to serve the masses is to become a hero. Moreover, the democratic movement has given rise to social questions which present this special danger : that there is a large section of society at present that would fain solve these questions without and against the authority of the Church.

Now Saint Vincent de Paul is peculiarly appropriate to the entire situation. Who was a greater servant of the people than he ? The eighteenth century, that respected nothing, acknowledged this great benefactor of mankind. The stupendous works accomplished by him have unquestionably proved the hollowness of the chimera of our day, which aims at secularising, de-Christianising beneficence itself, and they point to the true source, the true inspiration, and the true genius of charity.

This is the standpoint from which Mgr. Bougaud wrote the saint's life. We feel while reading it that he always addresses himself to the men and women of his own time. He had a presentiment that it was to be his last effort, and he wished it to be his parting word. It may be said that he put all his talent and all his heart in his work. We recognise an art more beautiful than ever, a restrained ardour that denotes the author's greatest effort, and a tact that reveals the experienced writer and the consummate historian.

The life of Saint Vincent de Paul had already been  
VOL. I. \* 6



well studied and often written. Of all the saint's biographers, Abelly, the first in point of time, shall perhaps always remain the first in authority, notwithstanding the many things that are to be desired in his valuable book. Subsequent biographers have each their merit, which it is our intention neither to dispute nor diminish. Mgr. Bougaud, however, the saint's latest historian, has had this advantage over the others, of being able to sift a large collection of the saint's letters, which were only brought to light within the last few years.

The special value of his work, however, consists less in the new matter which he brings to light than in the manner he narrates a life so well known. Thanks to his art, to his wise and clear arrangement, notwithstanding its innumerable details, the history develops itself with a charming rapidity and clearness that delight one. A quiet and restrained ardour is always felt, which sometimes waxes into an eloquence that moves and fascinates; in a word, his style is at once dignified and literary, graceful and vivid. Hence, perusal of this book produces a deep impression. Men of the world, for whom especially it was written, believers or non-believers, will not lay it down without feeling that they have contemplated in Saint Vincent de Paul, and in almost superhuman proportions, a great man and a great saint.

Such is the work which worthily crowns the labours of Mgr. Bougaud. He has bequeathed it to us, we cannot say unfinished, since he has brought us as far as the canonisation of the saint, having himself revised and corrected the work with the greatest care. Death,

we cannot too deeply regret, prevented him from publishing it.

An old and cherished friendship has merited that honour for us. We feel bound to bring out the work exactly as he left it. However, since the publication of the first edition, the author's chapter on the virtues of Saint Vincent has been found, and hence we substitute it for that which was taken from Abelly. Moreover, at the suggestion of some friends, many corrections have been made in this edition, which undoubtedly Mgr. Bougaud should have made himself had he lived. Again, a new jewel was added to the already brilliant aureola of Saint Vincent de Paul when Leo XIII. proclaimed him Patron of Works of Charity. How that glorious title was petitioned and obtained, could not but add interest to the biography, and this, together with a few details on the translation of the saint's relics, are all that we have added to Mgr. Bougaud's work.

We confidently present it to the public, who will find in it, in all their brilliancy, the noble qualities of the illustrious writer. Speak again, cherished friend, through the pages of your book to this age, that has become your willing audience. *Defunctus adhuc loquitur.*



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BOOK I

GOD PREPARES SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL  
FOR HIS GREAT MISSION





# HISTORY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL

## BOOK I

### GOD PREPARES SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL FOR HIS GREAT MISSION

#### CHAPTER I

##### BIRTH—PRIMARY EDUCATION—ORDINATION

1576-1600

IN the early years of the seventeenth century a priest might be seen frequently walking through the streets of Paris. Those who met him, not knowing who he was, did not pay him the slightest attention. His coarse clothes, his patched soutane, his very figure, which at first sight seemed ordinary, denoted one of those devoted priests that are passed unnoticed. His name was in keeping with his dress, he was simply called Mr. Vincent.

If the passer-by had examined his countenance more closely, he should have observed an indescribable expression of rare humility, simplicity, and kindness ; but the world is incapable of such insight, and even this was not enough to reveal to it the prodigy before it.

In truth, that humble priest was undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary characters that the seventeenth century had witnessed—a century, too, so fruitful in great

#### 4 HISTORY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL

geniuses and great saints. He was one of those men of whom antiquity had not even dreamed, and of whom Christianity itself has produced but a few. Scarcely dead, the Church raised him on her altars, and the world adopted his name and made it a synonym for charity. The philosophy that rails at everything holy pardoned him for being a Christian, and was charmed in reading his history. The Revolution itself, stained with the blood of murdered priests, erected a statue to him; and when at length the nineteenth century dawned, it saluted him with a chorus of admiration that eclipsed all previous praise.

What brought about all this? By what charm has that humble priest been able to arouse around his tomb, so deep and universal an enthusiasm? What has he done for souls and society, that voices usually so discordant should chorus his praise? This is what we are about to see, if God enables us to paint for our contemporaries the true character of Saint Vincent de Paul.

He was born on Easter Tuesday, April 24, 1576, in Pouy, a little village of seven to eight hundred inhabitants, not far from Dax, in the Landes department. A heavy cloud envelops the circumstances of the birth of this great saint. We scarcely know his father's full name. According to Abelly it was Jean de Paul; but according to Collet, Guillaume de Paul; and letters at the time of the saint's ordination leave a blank for his father's Christian name, clearly showing that there was a doubt on the point even at Tarbes. His mother's name was Bertrande de Moras. Neither of his parents was of noble birth, as is sometimes thought, and as some have endeavoured to establish. They were poor country people with no pretensions to nobility, as Saint Vincent himself was so fond of recalling.

His father, low-sized, lame, somewhat keen and shrewd, as peasants usually are, was an excellent Christian and straightforward man. His mother was a pious woman, and some circumstances would lead us to think she was of a better family than her husband, but there is little certainty. One day an old woman, thinking the more easily to obtain an alms, said to the saint that she had been a servant with his mother. "O my good woman," said he, "you make a mistake; my mother never had a servant, she did everything herself, for she was the wife of a poor peasant, and I am his son." This is all we know about her. Her joy when God blessed her marriage with six children, how she reared them in piety, whether she petted her third son, Vincent, who was to become so great a saint—all these sweet memories, noted with such care in many of the lives of the saints, will not be found here nor in any part of this great life, for more than half is lost in shade.

The unpretentious house where these two pious Christians lived, and where our saint was born, is still to be seen. It was built like all the peasants' houses of the country, of heavy oak beams, bedded in clay mixed with straw. The house was pretty large, containing a ground-floor and five apartments, together with the barns. We enter at once, by a rather heavy oak door, into the first apartment. A high chimney-piece in dark wood was at the end, and a small window in front and on one side. The ceiling was of oak, and the floor earthen. This apartment served alike for kitchen, dining-room, sitting-room, and reception-room, and two other rooms opened off it on the left. The first was the parents' room, in which Saint Vincent was born; the other was a room destined for the eldest son when he married. This was the first and principal portion of

## 6 HISTORY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL

the house. Behind were two rooms, one the sons' bedroom, and the other, on the right, the daughters'. The first opened on the garden, and by a staircase led into the large granaries. The daughters' room was nearer, and had no door leading out, so they could neither come in nor go out, except under their parents' eyes as they passed through the sitting-room. The roof was of brick, and shaped so as to allow the rain to fall to the right and left. The stables were outside; at the back were those for the sheep and swine, while beside the kitchen were the cattle. A little opening in the wall kept them in sight, and afforded a ready means of passing on a slide some of their food. Similar arrangements were in all the farm-houses. The cattle were the peasant's support, and of these he was proudest and most careful. Ten or twelve acres were attached to the house, and this composed Jean de Paul's holding. It was known, I cannot say why, as Ranquines, and gave its name to the whole village, perhaps because it was the largest and best kept. Unquestionably they were not well off, especially as six children had to be provided for; but neither were they in want, as we might be inclined to infer from the saint's extreme humility. It is among such lives of toil, regularity, economy, and sobriety, that good morals are maintained, and great souls often reared.

The chosen infant was baptized the very day he was born. Notwithstanding its distance, his pious mother wished him to be brought to their poor dilapidated parish church at Pouy, still to be seen full of the relics of Saint Vincent de Paul. To the left of the entrance, battered and disfigured by time, is a poor wrought-iron font fitted in the wall, and here the saint was baptized. Around are the seats from which for twelve years he

listened to his first lessons in catechism, and above is the altar at which he made his first communion. This altar having fallen asunder, it was replaced by another ; but the venerable reredos representing Saint Peter kneeling at the feet of our Lord and receiving the keys, is preserved and attached to the wall. At the other end rises the cemetery, where repose, forgotten save by God, the parents who gave to the world and to the Church Saint Vincent de Paul. Around is an immense plain studded with flocks, where many a time the youthful saint wandered.

There were no servants in Jean de Paul's house, the parents doing everything, assisted by their children. Some helped their father at the plough, and the others led the flocks out to graze. When Saint Vincent was old enough he was put to the latter work, and remained at it for many a year, during which he began to manifest virtues seldom found in young persons. In the middle of this marshy plain, shaded by old oak-trees and watered by a pond, where his flocks used to graze, there was one spot dear to his piety and his heart. This was the ruins of an old chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, and the object of an ancient holy pilgrimage. Six years before the saint's birth (1570), the Calvinists had burnt this chapel, and in order to save the statue from the indignities of the heretics, the people hid it in the pond. Nothing remained then but the débris of the burning ; but this was doubly sacred, from the veneration and love of the people, and from the outrages of the heretics. Here might often be seen the young saint kneeling in prayer, and here it was he first manifested that ardent love of the Blessed Virgin which never left him.

In this place also there is another witness to his youthful piety. In front of the house was an aged oak,



## 8 HISTORY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL

even at the time of his birth many centuries old, and at present, after more than three hundred years, still spreading its magnificent branches. But even in 1576 time had eaten away the trunk, and the child utilised this cavity to place in it a statue of the Blessed Virgin, around which he loved to twine wild flowers. Many an hour he spent before it as he tended his flock. What sighs, what prayers ascended to heaven from under those branches, whose very leaves Catholic piety has for three centuries carried as relics all over the world !

But let us finish tracing the spots where our saint spent his youth. The plain rose somewhat towards the south, showing in the distance the ruins of the old castle of Montgaillard. One day the Bishop of Saint-Pons, who was born there, alluded to it as his home. "Oh ! I know it well," promptly replied the humble priest, "I often brought my flocks in that direction."

What, perhaps, was more striking in such tender years than his piety was his charity. When a child, he used to give everything away, without keeping anything for himself. In the mornings, going along the road with his little knapsack filled for the day, he hastened to share his allowance with those who were worse off. If his father sent him for flour, and if he met some poor person, he took down his bag and gave him a handful, which did not displease his father, who was a good-natured man. Another time, for doing little services, he had saved up thirty sous—quite a fortune even at present for a peasant's child ; but how much more then, when money was so valuable, and represented, perhaps, the child's savings for more than a year. Some poor wretch chanced to turn up, and the child did not hesitate, but gave him all he had.

Thus he grew up till he was twelve (1588), and like

his piety and charity, his mind was developing, so it was determined to send him away to school. Had he already made his first communion? Was it the manner in which he learned the catechism, that suggested to the good priest of Pouy the idea of sending him away? With what faith and devotion he approached the holy table? Was it thought a pity to allow such a child to remain tending cattle? All this is probable, but history is silent. The Franciscans had a small college at Dax, where for sixty livres a year they educated young boys. It is said that the child's father, in taking this important step of sending him to college, was not free from human motives. There was near him, perhaps at Dax, a man of the same standing as himself, whose son having become a priest, a religious and prior of his monastery, had succeeded by his talent and influence in amassing great wealth, which he spent on his family. Why could not little Vincent do as much? He was highly gifted, and the sacrifices they should make now, would be rewarded a hundred-fold later on. But though a grain of human motives was mingled with the consent which the father gave to his son's vocation, yet he had a higher aim too. "He will make a good priest," said he, "for he has a tender heart."

Thus our young saint entered the college at Dax in 1588, at the age of twelve, and remained till he was sixteen. We know nothing of these four years, except that he even surpassed in virtue as well as in talent the hopes that were entertained of him. In this virtue there was just one slight stain, that nobody knew, nor should we believe it had he not revealed it himself. It is strange that the man who was to be such a prodigy of humility, that it is questionable whether his humility surpassed his charity, should blush among the children

of the rich, on account of the lowliness of his parents. "I remember," said he, "that one time when at college, being told that my father, who was only a poor peasant, was waiting for me, I refused to see him, which was a great sin." "I believe," adds Mme. Lamoignon, "the greatest sin he ever committed." Another day, addressing his confrères, he said : "Alas, gentlemen, whom do you obey? You obey one who, like the Scribes and Pharisees, is full of vice and sin, but this will render your obedience the more meritorious. I often recall to mind that when I was a little boy, brought to town by my father, I was ashamed to be seen with him or to acknowledge him, because he was poorly dressed and a little lame. Oh, wretch, how disobedient I have been ! I ask God's pardon for that, and all the scandal I have given, and beg the prayers of the little company, that God may forgive me and grant me true contrition."

This is the first time we hear Saint Vincent speaking, and we should remark his tone.

There was at this time in Dax a lawyer, M. de Commet, who was looked up to, on account of his birth, means and talent, and he had two sons at college with our saint. Being a magistrate in Pouy, he did not mix with the parents of the saint, of whose success the Franciscans had told him. It occurred to M. de Commet to take the young student into his own house, and have him as a tutor for his two sons. He would accompany them to school, which would not prevent him from studying on his own account, and thus he would relieve his parents of the large amount which they had spent on him for the last four years. We must stop here to pay a grateful tribute to this provincial lawyer. His name is all that we know, for there is no account of his life. He has had an

immense influence on the interests of the Church, inasmuch as he not only retained Saint Vincent for two years, but having carefully observed him, he became convinced that such a character should not remain in the world, and urged him to turn his attention to the ecclesiastical state. At first the humble young man was startled at the thought, and resisted it, but he had the greatest confidence in M. de Commet, who was a virtuous man, and whom he regarded as a second father. His professors in Dax being of the same opinion as M. de Commet, Saint Vincent, with the permission of the Chapter of Dax, the see being vacant, received tonsure and the four minor orders from Mgr. Diharse, Bishop of Tarbes, in the collegiate church of Bidache, on December 20, 1596.<sup>1</sup> He was at this time twenty years, seven months, and twenty-three days.

Having taken this important step and received tonsure, it was now necessary to determine in what university the young Vincent de Paul should study theology. There were two celebrated universities near Dax — Saragossa in Spain, and Toulouse in France. Why was Saragossa thought of? The fact is, that it was so esteemed that Saint Vincent went there; but, we know not why, he remained only a short time, returning to Toulouse, where he spent seven years. To defray so much expense, his father sold a pair of oxen, and not unlikely M. de Commet, who, as we shall see, watched over the future of our saint with such tenderness, added something also. Thus he was enabled to make his first theological studies. When the vacation of 1598 came round, his resources were exhausted, and not wishing to burden either his father or his kind

<sup>1</sup> Collet, according to Abelly, Sept. 19.

friend, Saint Vincent did what our poorer students do nowadays—he obtained a tutorship. He secured one at the castle of Buzet, in the little town of the same name, about five leagues from Toulouse. The lord, Hebrard de Grossoles, had two very young sons, Renaud and Jean. After confiding them to Saint Vincent for the vacation, he was so impressed with his piety, talent and influence, that when the vacation was over, he and his good wife, preferring to be separated for a time from their children, than that the latter should lose so holy a guardian, determined that they should continue their studies and return with Saint Vincent to Toulouse. The saint attended the university lectures while his young pupils were at school, and during the intervals he helped them at their lessons. Others were not slow to join them, and among them were two grand-nephews of the heroic Jean de la Valette, Grand Master of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, who had successfully defended Malta against the entire forces of Soliman, and thus preserved the honour and peace of Christian Europe. The Duke of Epemon, a near relative of those two young noblemen, was so struck with the saint's prudent and devoted care, that he expressed his profound admiration, and for many years regretted not having procured a bishopric for him.<sup>1</sup>

It was amidst this little world, of which he was at once the father and master, that the young saint prosecuted, and after seven years completed, his theological studies. He successively obtained his bachelorship in theology, professorship of Peter Lombard's second book, and the *Gallia Christiana*<sup>2</sup> gives him the title of doctor of theology. We are assured of his bachelor-

<sup>1</sup> Collet.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. ii. p. 1403.



ship, and of the commission to explain the Master of the Sentences ; but his certificate of doctor of theology has not been discovered, and many think his humility made him destroy it. Whatever he was, it is computed, says Abelly, that he spent more than sixteen years studying in Dax and at the University of Toulouse. Years afterwards the Jansenists, distorting some expressions of the saint, made through humility, to the effect that he was a scholar of the fourth form, endeavoured to establish his ignorance ; but those who have read his two thousand letters will no longer doubt the depth and extent of the saint's theological learning.

While surrounded by his dear pupils, who defrayed his university expenses, Saint Vincent received holy orders. He was made sub-deacon on September 19, 1598,<sup>1</sup> and deacon three months afterwards, December 19, in the Cathedral of Tarbes, by Mgr. Diharse. His dimissorial letter for the sub-diaconate was signed by Guillaume de Massiot, Vicar-General of Tarbes, the see being vacant at the time, and bears date, September 10, 1598. For the diaconate, however, it was dated December 11, and signed by the same, but in the name of Jean-Jacques du Salt, Bishop-Elect of Dax. Now that he had received holy orders, nothing further remained but to prepare for the priesthood. The year 1599 was destined to see him ascend the altar, and already Mgr. Salt had sent the letters to that effect. The saint looked forward to this event with anxious fear. He trembled to think that his hands should touch the adorable body of our Lord, and to satisfy his humility and fervour, his ordination was postponed for a year.

It was during this interval that his father died. He never ceased to entertain great hopes of his son, and

<sup>1</sup> Not February 27, as Abelly says.

although he was not well off, and left a wife and five children, yet, by his will, dated February 7, 1598, he wished that every sacrifice should be made for Saint Vincent's studies, and made special provisions in his favour. But the humble and pious youth refused them all, deeming his pupils sufficient, and only feeling too happy to leave to his mother and brothers his father's modest heritage.

It was towards the end of the following year, September 23, 1600, that Saint Vincent received the priesthood. He was ordained by Mgr. François de Bourdeille, Bishop of Périguez, in his own private chapel at Saint Julien, now known as Château-l'Évêque. This chapel is still to be seen, and an annual pilgrimage commemorates the event.

We might have thought that having been ordained at Château-l'Évêque, Saint Vincent would have said his first mass there. But his old and cherished Buzet claimed him. It may be that M. and Mme. de Grossoles and their two children had assisted at his ordination, and urged him to come to Buzet, in order to have the happiness of hearing his first mass. However, they could not succeed in gaining him over. About twenty minutes' walk from Buzet, situated on the mountain-top, and hidden in the wood, was an old church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. How often had he visited this spot! Tradition points out the path he used to tread, and it was there he chose to say his first mass. Afterwards he would admit the people, but at his first mass he must be alone, absolutely alone, with the priest and server, as the rubrics prescribe. "We have heard it said," writes Abelly, "that he had such an idea of the greatness of this Divine action, that he trembled, and not having the courage to celebrate publicly, he preferred to say it in a retired

chapel, assisted merely by the priest and server." Long afterwards, in the peasants' cottages, might be seen an old picture representing the saint's first mass, and written at the bottom was : " Saint Vincent de Paul said his first mass in the chapel of the Blessed Virgin beyond Tarn, situated in the wood on the mountain-top. He chose this place in order to offer the adorable sacrifice with less distraction and with the deepest recollection, having, as is customary, an assistant priest and server."

But what neither pen nor pencil can describe are the sentiments which animated him, whom Saint Francis de Sales regarded "as the holiest priest of his time." He was enraptured to think of the greatness of the priesthood. That a man, a simple and poor man like him, was empowered to bring down from heaven and place Jesus Christ on our altars by a few words from his unworthy lips, excited in him an amazement so great, that it completely overcame him. He never ceased saying during the remainder of his life, that had he realised what it was to be a priest, he would have preferred tilling the ground than to undertake so holy an office. During the sixty years he was a priest he never departed from these sentiments of his first mass, or rather year by year his fervour increased.

## CHAPTER II

SAINT VINCENT'S CAPTIVITY IN TUNIS—HIS VISIT TO ROME  
—HE IS SENT WITH PRIVATE LETTERS TO HENRY IV.

1600—1609

FIVE years after his ordination, Saint Vincent was suddenly torn away from the peaceful retired life he had hitherto led, and subjected to a series of extraordinary adventures that resemble a romance. At first sold as a slave in the market-place of Tunis, brought away into the heart of the desert, he was deprived of all spiritual aid, and even of the happiness of saying mass for two years (1605-1607). Then escaping from Tunis with his master, whom he had converted, and crossing to Aigues-Mortes, he went to Avignon. He is next presented to Mgr. Pierre Montorio, Papal Nuncio, who, becoming attached to him, brought him to Rome, where he remained fifteen months. From Rome he is sent to Henry IV., with private messages not to be risked in a letter. He is received by that great King, and then just at the moment when he seemed to touch the highest honours, he quietly disappears into a small parish in the suburbs of Paris. These are facts which we should hardly credit, were they not related by Saint Vincent himself. And in what a style! Vivid, original, picturesque, but with a strange peculiarity of expression, which shows that if he had made brilliant studies, it was at a distance from Paris, in the heart of the Landes, where the language was at least twenty-five years behind the time, not only compared with that spoken at court, but

in Burgundy and Savoy. But let us go more into detail, in order that we may be the better acquainted with the saint.

Immediately after his ordination his protector and friend, M. de Commet, used every endeavour to obtain a living for him near Dax ; for he wished to secure for his own soul, as well as for his wife and children, the guidance of so holy a priest. Saint Vincent was, as a matter of fact, appointed to Thil, a country parish of sixteen hundred souls, situated in the Landes, about two miles from Dax. But this living, rather important for a young priest, being disputed by another candidate who had asked and obtained it from Rome, the saint preferred renouncing his right to having a lawsuit. By this act of disinterestedness and humility he was again free to continue his studies, and returned to the University of Toulouse (1600-1601). While M. de Commet was endeavouring to obtain a good living for our saint, the Duke of Epernon, whose nephews had been his pupils, had another object in view, viz., to obtain a bishopric for him. The influence of the Duke, the holiness of the young priest, and the custom of the time, rendered this project not improbable, and perhaps it is to this circumstance we may attribute a trip to Bordeaux, which the saint made at this period. He met the Duke of Epernon<sup>1</sup> there ; but of that interview, as of the whole journey, he has said nothing except that it cost him a good deal. There was question at least of some important benefice, as the letter we are about to quote implies, in which the saint says that at the very moment "fortune seemed to smile on him, it was then that it showed its fickleness and inconstancy."

On returning to Toulouse, Saint Vincent learned that

<sup>1</sup> Collet.



an old lady of rank and piety had just died, making him her heir. She must have been one of those devoted to the Church, and noticing this young priest so poor and so exceptionally gifted, and even more pious than learned, determined to enable him to prosecute his studies as far as possible. The legacy was not much, consisting merely of some furniture and land, with a bill for four or five hundred crowns due to her by a spendthrift, against whom she had obtained a writ shortly before her death. Trifling though it was, it compensated our saint for the benefice which he had abandoned, afforded him the means of paying his debts and time to finish his studies. He accepted it then ; and as the spendthrift, to evade his debt, had fled to Marseilles, and there engaged in business with wonderful success, the saint resolved to find him and be paid. He relates to M. de Commet, in a most amusing way, how he went to Marseilles to get the money. "You know, sir," he wrote, "how, on my return from Bordeaux, I found that a good old lady in Toulouse had made a will in my favour. The inheritance was valued at four or five hundred crowns, which was to be paid by a spendthrift. I went, by the advice of my best friends, to Toulouse, in order to get a portion of the money and to sell the property. Besides, I wanted the money to pay my debts, and to defray the expenses in pursuing an object I must not mention. On my arrival I found that the debtor had absconded, in consequence of a writ which the old lady had caused to be issued against him, but I was informed that he was doing well at Marseilles, and had plenty of means. Under these circumstances my adviser came to the conclusion, and indeed it was a matter of necessity, that I should go to Marseilles; and that having arrested the debtor, I might be able to get at least two

or three hundred crowns. Not having sufficient money to do this, I sold the horse that I had hired in Toulouse, intending to pay on my return, a plan which misfortune also delayed, and I must say it, to my shame, I was thus embarrassed. This should not have occurred had God enabled me to carry out an undertaking which seemed likely to be successful. Thus I set out, found my debtor in Marseilles, had him arrested, and obtained three hundred crowns, with which I was satisfied." We see here a Saint Vincent de Paul that little resembles the one we know.

After this he was preparing to return overland to Toulouse, when a gentleman whom he met suggested going by sea to Narbonne. It was the month of July, the day was splendid, and they should arrive the same evening. A saving of time, of fatigue, and of expense, how could he resist such an opportunity? "We started under the very best circumstances, and should have arrived safely, had not three Turkish brigantines, which were coasting along the Gulf of Lyons, watching for vessels coming from the fair of Beaucaire, chased us. The pirates attacked the vessel so fiercely that two or three were killed, and I myself received a wound that reminded me ever afterwards of the fierce encounter."<sup>1</sup>

Not to speak of four or five of their oarsmen, one of the Turkish captains was killed. This enraged them, and their first act was to murder the pilot of our saint's ship. "After attending to our wounds they chained us, and then plundered everything, giving liberty, however, to those who offered no resistance. With their spoil they continued for seven or eight days to make for Barbary, a den of thieves connived at by the Grand Turk. Here we were put up for sale, with a formal

<sup>1</sup> Chantelauze, p. 20.

declaration to the effect that the capture was made in a Spanish vessel, for otherwise we should have been liberated by the French consul. After confiscating all our clothes, they gave each a pair of trousers, a coat and hat, and then led us on view through the streets of Tunis. Having gone through the town five or six times, with a chain around our necks, they brought us back to the ship, so that the merchants might see who could eat well and who could not, and that our wounds were not mortal. Then we were brought to the market-place, where the merchants were judging, just as if buying horses or cattle, making us open our mouths to see our teeth, feeling our sides, probing our wounds, making us walk, trot, run, raise weights and wrestle, in order to test our strength, besides subjecting us to a thousand other brutalities.”<sup>1</sup>

Vincent was first sold to a fisherman; but as the slightest thing made him sea-sick, he was resold to an old Mussulman apothecary, who for fifty years had been mixing metals and seeking the philosopher’s stone. The saint relates some curious experiences. “I have often seen him melt equal quantities of gold and silver, then mixing them with powder in the bottom of a crucible, place the whole in the fire for twenty-four hours, when the mixture would become all gold. Very often he amalgamated bad with good silver, and sold it for the benefit of the poor. My business was to keep up ten or fifteen furnaces, which, thank God, I made even a pleasure. My master liked me very much and took pleasure in talking to me of alchemy, and even of his religion, making every effort to win me over, promising me great riches and knowledge. God always inspired me with an assurance of my release, through the

<sup>1</sup> Chantelauze, p. 21.

constant prayers I offered to the Blessed Virgin, and to her intercession I attribute my deliverance.”<sup>1</sup>

But the Mussulman's researches how to cure diseases were of greater interest to our saint than these experiments in alchemy, the uselessness of which he clearly saw and often declared afterwards. The Arabs have always been doctors, and have transmitted from generation to generation secret and powerful cures for certain diseases. Our saint's friend and benefactor, M. de Commet, was a victim to the gravel, and Saint Vincent, always grateful, lost no opportunity of consulting his master in order to obtain a recipe. “With the hope and belief of seeing you again, sir, I was constantly asking my master to teach me how to cure the gravel, for I witnessed him working wonders every day. He taught me, and actually made me go through the process of mixing the ingredients. Oh! how often have I wished that I had been a slave before your brother died, and had learned the secret I am sending you. I firmly believe that, had I known it, he should be alive to-day.”<sup>2</sup>

Saint Vincent remained almost a year (September 1605 to August 1606) with this good old man, very kind and amiable, whose reputation was so great that Achmet I. summoned him to Constantinople. On his departure he bequeathed our saint to his nephew, who, having learned that the French consul, M. de Brèves, had arrived with orders from the Sultan to release all French slaves, hastened to sell him to an Italian renegade from Nice. This man, possessing some land up the country, brought off his purchase outside the consul's jurisdiction. He had three wives, and it is curious to note how God made use of one of them to set His servant free. “One of

<sup>1</sup> Chantelauze, pp. 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 23.

his three wives was a Turk," writes Saint Vincent, "and she became interested in me. Wishing to understand our mode of life, she came every day to where I was working in the field, and asked me to sing the praises of my God. The remembrance of '*Quomodo cantabimus in terra aliena*,' the song of the children of Israel, captives in Babylon, made me, with tears in my eyes, begin the psalm, '*Super flumina Babylonis*.' Then I sang the '*Salve Regina*,' and many other canticles, which gave her very great pleasure. She did not fail to tell her husband in the evening that he had done wrong in abandoning his religion, and of the happiness she felt in listening to me discoursing about God and singing His praises. This pleasure was so great that she believed the paradise of her ancestors, which she hoped to reach one day, was not so grand nor so delightful as the pleasure she experienced while I sang the praises of my God. She became another Caiphas or Balaam's ass by her words to her husband, for the next day he said it would be a great gain if they could return to France, but that in a few days he would remedy matters, so as to give glory to God. These few days turned out to be ten months, during which he held out vain hopes; but he afterwards, however, fulfilled them. We crossed in a little skiff to Aigues-Mortes (June 28), whence we went to Avignon, where, in the Church of Saint Peter, the vice-legate publicly received back the penitent renegade, to the great glory of God and the edification of all present."<sup>1</sup>

This vice-legate was a well-informed man, anxious to understand philosophic and scientific discoveries, and particularly those algebraic secrets, as they were then called, of which, it was said, the Arabs were the great

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. i. p. 1.



possessors. After some interviews with our saint, he was so charmed that he determined to detain him and bring him to Rome, whither he was returning. Learning that he was a priest, he desired him to write at once for the letters of his ordination, which were indispensable.

“It could not have occurred, sir,<sup>1</sup> that you and my relatives should have heard such reports of me from my creditors, whom I should have already paid the hundred or hundred and twenty crowns that the debtor gave me, had not my best friends advised me to keep the money till my return from Rome, lest I should require it, although I was travelling with and under the patronage of M.”

It was under these circumstances and for this end that the long letter, from which we quote some choice fragments, was written, and which explains the details into which the saint felt it his duty to enter. It was now two years since he had disappeared. He left for Marseilles in July 1605, and nothing had been heard of him since. What had become of him? Had he died *en route*? His mother, uncle, brothers, sisters, and all his friends were living in suspense. As soon as he could he had written to his mother; but had the letter reached her? If so, what joy she must have felt on receiving it, in seeing the tender care of Providence, and these miracles of grace! Certainly it was lucky that he told everything in that letter.

In it he dwelt on little but his humiliations and trials. However, fifty years afterwards, when a copy fell into his hands, he thought that he had made too much of his sufferings, and took every means to destroy the letter. In his eighty-fourth year, on the very eve of his death, he made every endeavour to procure and burn it.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter to M. de Commet.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. “Letters,” vol. i. p. I.

The letter of his ordination, which he had asked for, was immediately sent; but as they were not careful in having it signed and authenticated by the Bishop of Dax, it had to be rewritten three times before it was in the correct form.

We possess the saint's third letter to M. de Commet, which contains such interesting details that we feel bound to insert it. It is dated, Rome, February 28, 1608. "I am here in Rome continuing my studies, being supported by the vice-legate from Avignon, who honours me with his friendship and desires my advancement, on account of my having shown him some curious things that I learned from the Turk to whom, as I told you, I was sold. Among other things was an attempt at the mirror of Archimedes, an artificial means of making a corpse speak, by which this miserable man deceived the people, telling them that Mahomet thus made known to him his will. Besides this there were many other things that I taught the legate, of which he was so jealous that he did not like me to meet others, lest I should also teach them. He was anxious to enjoy the sole reputation of knowing these things, which he sometimes exhibited before his Holiness and the Cardinals. His affection and goodness leads me to hope for the means of an honourable retirement by enabling me to have a respectable benefice in France." He adds: "With this in view, it is absolutely necessary to have a copy of the letter of my ordination, signed and sealed by the Bishop of Dax, together with a character, which could be got by a brief inquiry from some of my friends. This is what the vice-legate is every day urging me to obtain. It is on that account I ask you, M., to be so kind as to copy my letter, and get the Bishop of Dax to give his signature on the form inserted, and to

send it to me by Father Pontanus. I should have sent you some money, only I feared it would be lost in the letter. This is why I ask you to arrange with my mother about the expense, for I suppose it will cost three or four crowns.”<sup>1</sup>

In the process of canonisation the devil's advocate (as he is called who raises objections) dwelt on these two letters as establishing Saint Vincent's belief in alchemy and the occult sciences. But it must be remembered there are two sorts of alchemy—one entirely superstitious and bad, and this the saint denounced and severely condemned, even in his two letters. The other is quite natural—the forerunner of modern science, and always worthy of support. Nothing is more beautiful than to witness a man so holy, so absorbed in God, receive the science with such joy. And what is not less admirable is to see our saint making no use of this knowledge, which would have brought him great profit, at a time when he was deeply in debt. And because the period of his slavery showed forth his virtue, he buried it in the most complete forgetfulness, never speaking of it, and only recalling his captivity in Tunis in order to show greater sympathy for victims around him.

During all these negotiations Saint Vincent was in Rome. He stayed with the vice-legat, who maintained him at his own expense, and thus free from all care, he divided his time between prayer and study. In the mornings he visited those sanctuaries, so numerous and touching, which Rome offers to the piety of the faithful, where so many saints have knelt, and still increase by their vigils and prayers the august character of those sacred places. “What a consolation it was for me,” he

<sup>1</sup> “Letters,” vol. i. p. 12.

writes, "to find myself in that city, the mistress of Christendom, the dwelling of the head of the Church militant, the spot where are the bodies of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, and of so many martyrs and holy personages who in past times have shed their blood and spent their lives for Jesus Christ. How happy I considered myself in walking on the ground so many saints had trodden ! it was a consolation that affected me even to tears."<sup>1</sup>

The desire he had for learning not having diminished amidst so many distractions, he continued his theological studies. During the day he regularly assisted at the celebrated lectures of the Dominicans at the Sapienza, and in the evening he met at the vice-legate's all the illustrious men of France and Italy who were then in Rome. Everywhere he attracted attention by his piety, humility, prudence, extraordinary good sense, and that art of speaking and of remaining silent which few possessed more perfectly than he. It is almost certain that he was presented to the Pope, but his great modesty conceals the fact.

About this time Henry IV. was at the zenith of his power, after realising his first project—the pacification of France and the union of its contending parties by the Edict of Nantes. He was now preparing the second part of his programme, to be the crowning of all his glory, namely, the coalition of all the European States, France, England, Holland, Sweden, and Denmark, Catholics and Protestants, against Spain and Austria, whose daring attitude towards France menaced her very existence. This design, taken up by Richelieu and continued by Mazarin, led a century afterwards to the overthrow of Spain and Austria and to the rise of French power.

<sup>1</sup> "Letters."

To strengthen the bonds of that delicate alliance, Henry retained ambassadors everywhere, to study the feelings at the different courts, so as to secretly and promptly inform him. He had three in Rome, the chief being M. de Brèves, who had just succeeded Cardinal d'Ossat.<sup>1</sup> I cannot say what transpired, but it was so important, so confidential, that not wishing to trust such a secret to an ordinary courier, they looked about for a man of the greatest discretion, who could rely on his memory and explain the matter to the King in person. Saint Vincent was chosen, and was commissioned to appear himself before Henry IV. About the beginning of 1609 the saint arrived in Paris, and was many times received by the King. But it is not to so humble and prudent a soul as Saint Vincent that we must go to seek the nature of such interviews. He never allowed a word to escape his lips about these royal audiences.

Assuredly Mgr. Montorio was delighted to see his protégé thus placed on the high-road to distinction. He knew that Henry IV. was a good judge of character, and it must be acknowledged that amid all his levities the King ardently desired good bishops. He left no stone unturned to force M. de Bérulle to accept the mitre, threatening him even with exile if he persisted in his refusal. He returned to the question as many as five times with Saint Francis de Sales, offering him the very best sees according as they became vacant. We may therefore infer a good deal from these interviews of Henry's with Saint Vincent, but nothing, however, came of them. Had the King not time in the heat of the negotiations of 1609, so soon fatally terminated, to appreciate Saint Vincent de Paul? Or rather, had Saint

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Collet, p. 25; Abelly, p. 20. But Abelly is wrong in stating that it was Cardinal d'Ossat who commissioned Saint Vincent. The Cardinal was dead since March 13, 1604.



Vincent, who had not refused to bring a despatch, opposed a measure praised by all politicians, to which, however, the saints were less inclined and Saint Vincent himself never liked—a measure to which all his life he offered such opposition that, under Richelieu and Mazarin, it became a danger for him? Whatever it was, he descended, without regret and as unknown as formerly, the staircase of the Louvre, which later on he was to ascend so often and in circumstances so tragic. Since God had now brought him to Paris he resolved to remain there, and took an humble dwelling in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, in the Rue Saints-Pères, near the Hospital of Charity.

## CHAPTER III

SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL PLACES HIMSELF UNDER THE  
DIRECTION OF M. DE BÉRULLE—WITH HIS ADVICE,  
HE ACCEPTS THE PARISH OF CLICHY

1609—1613

IT was the proximity of the Hospital of Charity that had really determined Saint Vincent to settle down in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. This hospital had just been completed. It was built two years previously (1607) by Mary de Medicis, in the large gardens that surrounded an old chapel dedicated to Saint Peter. Hence the names Saint-Pierre, Saint-Père, Saints-Pères are still in that quarter. This institution was carried on by some brothers of the Order of Saint John of God, recently founded in Spain, and five years before brought to Paris by Mary de Medicis. As there were only a few brothers they allowed charitable persons to help them, and great lords, noble ladies, priests, and even bishops, had here the honour of visiting and serving the poor. Saint Vincent gladly joined them. Every morning he came to care the sick and dress their wounds, and sitting by their beds he spoke of pious subjects. Always humble and fearing to intrude, he asked the brothers as a favour to permit him to help them in their work. It is said that it was here, in one of the wards, that the humble Vincent came in contact with the holy and already illustrious M. de Bérulle. Hearing of a poor priest who fulfilled the office of an

angel of mercy, M. de Bérulle expressed a wish to meet him. They introduced Saint Vincent, embarrassed, blushing, and endeavouring to refuse the honour. The two priests read each other at a glance. Our humble saint at once placed himself under the direction of M. de Bérulle, and thus arose an indissoluble bond between them.

“At that time,” says Bossuet, “Pierre de Bérulle, a truly illustrious and deserving man, occupying a position, to which, I will presume to say, the purple would have added nothing, so exalted was his virtue and learning, was beginning to give to the French Church the purest and highest lights of the Christian priesthood and of the ecclesiastical state.” He was only a year older than Saint Vincent, and was born near Paris, of a family distinguished in legal circles. His mother was a Séguier, who, when a young widow, joined the Carmelites, and led a life of sanctity as Sister Mary of the Angels. From this difference in their birth arose at once the difference in their training. While our humble saint was guarding his flocks, and later on, while enslaved in the desert of Africa, was practising there virtue only known to heaven, Pierre de Bérulle was growing up with distinction, shining in Paris and at court. Endowed with an angelic innocence, which astonished Henry IV., with boundless piety and humility, he was scarcely twenty-four when he saw at his feet the highest ecclesiastical dignities, but without ever wishing to accept any of them. Henry wished successively to make him Bishop of Laon, Nantes, Luçon, and Archbishop of Lyons, but the deep faith of the humble priest, the yet unformed but commanding consciousness of his true vocation made him regardless of the best offers. There was not in the Church of France at the time a greater mind. If he had lived

twenty-five years later, when the French language had lost its Latin form and thrown off the host of adjectives and present participles that embarrassed it, his beautiful works on the greatness of Jesus Christ would have been popular, and would have remained as celebrated as Bossuet's, a little inferior perhaps to them, but of the same order. He possessed that great orator's sublimity, passion and power of eloquent appeal, to which he added an incomparable sweetness and unction. The illustrious Cardinal Perron said of him: "If you wish to convince heretics, bring them to me; if to convert them, bring them to the Bishop of Geneva; but if to convince and convert them, bring them to M. de Bérulle."<sup>1</sup>

We cannot reckon the noble lords and ladies whom he converted. Priests even came to be directed by him. Père Bourdoise lived near him for about three months, "anxious," says his biographer, "to approach this burning fire and see this prodigy of charity, that he might share in its ardour and light."<sup>2</sup> Père Eudes, the founder of a Congregation of priests devoted to the education of ecclesiastics, came there also for direction; and there too shall we see Saint Vincent de Paul. No less a person than Saint Francis de Sales said, that if he could choose to be any one, he should wish to be M. de Bérulle, and would willingly leave his position to enjoy the direction of so great a man. When Saint Vincent met him in the hospital ward, he had just returned from Spain, with the first Carmelites, who were soon to spread over Paris. He was beginning, with the assistance of Mary de Medicis, the Duchess of Longueville and Mme. Acarie, that mother-house of Saint Jacques where the Carmelites settled, to convert and to sanctify the noble ladies of the seventeenth century. While he was establishing this centre

<sup>1</sup> Mgr. Perraud, *Oratoire*, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> *Vie de M. Olier*, vol. i. p. 124.

of fervour, his ardent zeal was also meditating the plan of a religious Congregation like the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri, destined for the sanctification of the clergy.

Such was the holy director that God had prepared for Saint Vincent de Paul, to guide him amid the doubts of his as yet hidden vocation. How astonishing ! that a man destined to accomplish such great things, had not begun any of them at thirty-five. What am I saying ? We shall see him cautiously feeling his way up to fifty. M. de Bérulle, "who was one of the most enlightened men of his time," had no difficulty in discerning that Saint Vincent was called to do great things. According to Abelly and Collet, he may even have predicted that God wished him to establish a new Congregation of priests, who should be of great service to the Church.<sup>1</sup> But so far there were only the germs that required years to mature.

While M. de Bérulle was beginning to make known to Saint Vincent what Providence required of him, he was also supporting him amid the trials by which God ordinarily prepares those whom He calls to do great things. Among these trials there were two in particular, more severe than all the others, and more capable of crushing for ever a soul less courageous than our saint's. For reasons of economy, Saint Vincent had shared a room he had taken in the Faubourg Saint-Germain with one of his countrymen named Dulou, a justice of the peace in the canton of Sore. The judge, going out early one morning on business, forgot to close the cabinet where his money was, about four or five hundred francs. He left Saint Vincent in bed, somewhat unwell, and

<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Clement XI., Père de la Tour, sixth Sup.-Gen. of the Oratory, says : "*Berullius, velut futurorum, Deo sic donante, præsciens, instituendæ postmodum sacre congregationis Missionum auctorem ac fundatorem præsalutavit Vincentium.*"



awaiting medicine, which he had been promised. The boy who brought the medicine, looking for a glass in the cabinet, saw the money, and put it in his pocket without saying a word. When the judge returned he was astonished at not finding his purse. He demanded it from Saint Vincent, who said no more than that he neither took it, nor saw it taken. The judge became enraged and drove the saint from the apartment, defaming him everywhere, in the house, in the neighbourhood, as well as among his friends and acquaintances. One day even, when M. de Bérulle had in his house some persons of rank and piety, among whom was our saint, the judge went there and before this select company publicly treated him as a thief. The saint was satisfied with simply replying, "God knows the truth," but he said this with such modesty and sweetness, that it captivated everybody. It was only a long time afterwards<sup>1</sup> that the little boy, arrested for other thefts, confessed this one to the very same judge of Sore. The judge at once wrote to Saint Vincent, asking pardon, and protesting that if he did not send it in writing, he should go to him with a rope round his neck. In the interval the calumny had spread, and for six months our saint lay under this odious accusation.

There is at this period a letter of Saint Vincent's to his mother, the only one we possess. It reveals him as poor, dejected, without position or resources and ready to leave Paris, to return and hide himself in a little village of the Landes. This is the letter:—

"PARIS, *February* 17, 1610.

"The assurance which the curé of Saint-Martin has given me of your health has pleased me as much as the sojourn which it is necessary for me to make here, to

<sup>1</sup> Abelly says "many years"; but St. Vincent himself says "six months."

recover the losses connected with the occasion of my advancement, makes me sad, not to be able to go and render the services which I owe you. I hope with the grace of God that my labours shall be blessed, and that I shall soon be afforded the means of honourably retiring, to employ the remainder of my days with you. I have laid open the state of my affairs to M. de Saint-Martin, who wishes to imitate the benevolence of M. de Commet towards us, and I have asked him to communicate all to you. I should like very much to know the state of your affairs; if all my brothers, sisters, relatives, and friends are well; especially whether my brother Gayon is married, and to whom. Moreover, how is my sister Marie de Paillotte getting on, and is she still with her brother-in-law Bertrand? As to my other sister, I think she must be comfortable. I wish, too, that my brother would make one of my nephews study; my misfortunes and the little service which I have been able to render, may have changed his mind, but the present ill-luck may be the forerunner of a bright future. This is all I have to say for the present, except to ask you to convey my humble regards to all my brothers, sisters, relatives, and friends. Praying God for your health and happiness, I am always your most humble, obedient and devoted child." <sup>1</sup>

About this time there occurred an extraordinary event, which had a decisive influence on the life of Saint Vincent de Paul. Doubting and wavering up to this, he at last finds his way. The heroic deed we are about to narrate is, as it were, the birth and baptism of the Patron of works of charity. There was then in Paris a doctor in theology, who, after becoming illus-

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. i. p. 14.

trious in public controversies with heretics, a victim probably of his own pride, had experienced a violent temptation against faith. He could no longer say mass, recite his office, nor enter a church; everything that recalled the thought of God only seemed to evoke from him frightful temptations to blasphemy. Moved to compassion at the sight of this poor priest, whom he knew, and after trying all means to cure him, Saint Vincent felt one of those sublime movements of grace of which history furnishes but few examples. He besought God to restore faith to the unhappy priest, offering himself, if necessary, to carry the burden which its victim could no longer bear. His prayer was heard. While light was dawning on the unfortunate priest's mind, while joy and peace were returning to his heart, Saint Vincent was descending into the depth of that abyss of doubts, temptations and darkness, from which he had delivered the priest. Thus he remained for four years<sup>1</sup> in an affliction it is difficult to realise, no longer having the strength to so frequently visit the hospitals, or to become engrossed with works of charity. This is how he was delivered from the trial. One day, more dejected than usual, he fell on his knees and vowed to consecrate his life to Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. He had no sooner pronounced these words than his sufferings vanished and peace returned. He has himself declared that from that day he seemed to see the truths of faith in the purest light.

It was during this trial that Saint Vincent resolved to lodge with M. de Bérulle and the priests who were founding the Oratory. Not that he had the remotest idea of joining them, for he often declared he never

<sup>1</sup> Collet, p. 27.

thought of it, and besides, M. de Bérulle saw he had another vocation. His intention in withdrawing to the Oratory was to be nearer him whom he called "his visible angel," and of whom he never had greater need than since the beginning of his great temptation against faith. At the same time, here he found peace, silence and that detachment from the world which he had vainly sought elsewhere. Poor, in need of a benefice in order to live, he had found a home, but even still he felt he was not satisfied.

He was now appointed chaplain to Queen Margaret, the separated spouse of Henry IV. How did he obtain such a post? Probably through the intervention of a friend, M. du Fresne, secretary of that princess, who, having made our saint's acquaintance, and "finding him humble, charitable and prudent, of marvellous discretion, doing good to all," became attached to him and recommended him to the Queen. She wished to see him, and subsequently made him her chaplain. But what a position for a man like our saint! Margaret, grand-daughter of Francis I., daughter of Henry II., sister of the last three Valois kings—Francis II., Charles IX., and Henry III.—of renowned beauty, lively and delicate temperament, had been married against her will and in spite of all protestations, to Henry of Navarre, afterwards Henry IV. An odious union, which neither one nor the other took seriously, which left them as divided and, alas! as thoughtless as before, and which resulted in both asking the Pope for an annulment. This was given in 1599, after a full trial at Rome, in which two diriment impediments were clearly proved, viz., want of consent, and consanguinity in the third degree. Some years afterwards, in 1605, Queen Margaret—for so she continued to be called—returned to

Paris. Separated now from Henry, but on the most friendly terms with him, he called her "his sister," and she called him "her brother and her king." She lived in her beautiful palace in the Rue de Seine, the magnificent gardens of which stretched to the river, and while endeavouring to be devout, she continued to mix in a court half pagan in its religion, literature, art and diplomacy. Although Saint Vincent did not reside in the palace, and never appeared at court except in discharge of his office, the dissipation that surrounded him was burdensome, and contributed not a little to his desire of seeking in the company of M. de Bérulle and his first companions an abode more congenial to his tastes. The house they occupied was a short distance from the palace, which enabled him to go there without resigning his office of chaplain, which was necessary for his livelihood. We presume he went there in March or April 1610, for he remained two years, till May 2, 1612, the date of his instalment in Clichy, and thus there is no doubt that he was living with M. de Bérulle and his companions at the time of the solemn foundation of the Oratory.

This ceremony took place on November 11, 1610, the Feast of Saint Martin, in a house in the Faubourg Saint-Jacques, known as the house of the Petit-Bourbon. Only five priests had joined M. de Bérulle. The morning was passed at the foot of the altar. At the mass, offered by M. de Bérulle, the Marchioness of Meignelais, who had given 50,000 livres, M. and Mme. Marillac, Mme. d'Autry, and Mme. Acarie went to holy communion. In the evening Mary de Medicis and Louis XIII. assisted at the office. Cardinal de Joyeuse was there also, as well as many bishops and such a large number of people that it was impossible to close



the doors till night. Saint Vincent was certainly in the assembly, but no mention is made of him.

The six priests who composed the rising Congregation were, besides M. de Bérulle, two doctors of the Sorbonne, MM. Jean Bence and Jacques Gastaud; Paul Métézeau, a bachelor of theology; two curés, Pierre Caron, who had left Beaumont, and François Bourgoing, who was anxious to resign Clichy. The last-mentioned, whose funeral oration Bossuet preached, calling him "a Christian of the primitive type," "a true priest of Jesus Christ," was determined to confide his parish only to a priest that was pious, zealous and able to continue the good works which he had begun. For many months he was seeking such a priest, when M. de Bérulle suddenly thought of proposing Saint Vincent.

It would seem that our saint deserved better than the little parish of Clichy, hidden in a suburb of Paris. He had now been more than two years chaplain-in-ordinary to Queen Margaret, and through her had got the Abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-la-Chaume of the Order of Cîteaux, in the diocese of Saintes. These were pre-sages of other favours, and he had only to wait and allow time to do the work. But M. de Bérulle, who thoroughly understood our saint, had far other thoughts. What were these empty titles to a soul like Saint Vincent's, who only thought of the poor?—merely vain play-toys, that not even afforded an opportunity of doing good. On the other hand, M. de Bérulle believed that it was in this part of the country that our saint was called to do great things. Clichy offered an excellent opportunity and would serve as a trial. He proposed it to Saint Vincent, who humbly submitted to his director, but without concealing his repugnance.

Not that the parish was too small, but he regarded the charge as too onerous. He preferred to love and serve the poor, and hesitated to undertake the care of souls. As to Père Bourgoing, he was delighted. This truly venerable man, after M. de Bérulle and Père de Condren, the third Superior-General of the Oratory (a priest, says Bossuet, by his zeal, his gravity and the innocence of his life), had thus the consolation on entering the Oratory of leaving his dear parish in the holiest hands he might wish for. Saint Vincent was installed in Clichy on May 2, 1612. We possess the formal document. "In the afternoon of May 2, 1612, he appeared at the door of the church, and presenting the resignation approved by Rome, demanded from Thomas Gallot, Père Bourgoing's deputy, entrance into the church. Having been admitted, he took the holy water, sprinkled it around, knelt before the crucifix and at the foot of the high altar, kissed the altar, the missal, the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament, and then the baptismal font, seated himself in the curé's place in choir, rang the bells—in a word, observed all the ceremonies used on these occasions. Afterwards he went in and came out of the presbytery. Then, according to royal edict, the deputy, in a loud and clear voice, proclaimed the taking possession, and nobody objecting, he handed the act of instalment to Saint Vincent."

Scarcely installed, Saint Vincent began to visit his parish, composed merely of peasants, but peasants full of faith, of great simplicity and purity of manners. A Jesuit preaching in presence of Saint Vincent, exclaimed in rapture "that all his parishioners lived like angels." Here and there might be seen a country residence of some rich family from Paris, but these were the exception. The poor were many and in want of everything.

Saint Vincent served them with his own hands, bringing them money and clothes. He gave them his whole heart, and it was the happiest time of his life. Twenty years afterwards he spoke of it with emotion. "Ah," he would say to himself, "how happy you are to have such good people! The Pope is not so happy. One day the first Cardinal de Retz said to me, 'How are you, sir?' I replied, 'I cannot tell you how happy I am.'—'Why?' inquired the Cardinal. 'Because my parishioners are so good and obedient to everything I tell them, that I say to myself, neither the Pope nor your Eminence is so happy.'"

His church falling into ruins, he determined to rebuild it, although the people were poor and he had nothing. But he was at the gates of Paris, and already he had there sufficient protectors and friends not to allow him to despair of such an undertaking. As a matter of fact, he rebuilt the church in less than a year, and this is the church that is to be seen to-day in that large and populous district. There is little change—the pulpit from which he preached is still preserved; in front, on the wall, is the crucifix he used, according to the custom of the time; and in the garden is a tree brought from Judea, which tradition says was planted by the saint.<sup>1</sup>

Now that the church was restored, he began his labours, and the first thing was to establish monthly communion. Imagine a parish of which almost all the people would be faithful to such an exercise! "Oh," said Saint Vincent, "how good are the people of Clichy! After recommending confession and communion on the first Sunday of the month, to my great joy nobody was absent." He added to this the association of the Rosary,

<sup>1</sup> Maynard.

a devotion so grand in itself, but so necessary in a parish where scarcely any one could read or write. At the same time he laid the foundation of an important work in another direction, by gathering around him a certain number of youths, forming them in piety and preparing them to discharge later on some ecclesiastical functions. Already he had twelve in his own house, and some of them became holy priests. Many other plans were in his mind, when suddenly he received a letter from M. de Bérulle, his director and counsellor, which pointed to another sphere of labour. At the sight of so much good accomplished in a single year, did M. de Bérulle think it a loss to retain such a man in so narrow a field of work? Would it not be better that, instead of saving a few hundred peasants, Saint Vincent should live in some illustrious family like that of De Gondi, one of the highest in the kingdom, which periodically gave forth cardinals, bishops and ministers, who, if penetrated with the Spirit of God by so holy a man, could do so much good in Church and State? M. de Bérulle thought so, and did not hesitate. Saint Vincent hesitated still less. On receiving word from his holy director he placed his scanty furniture in a waggon, and accompanied it on foot to M. de Bérulle. But obedience does not stifle regret. "I left with sorrow my little church," he wrote to a friend. "My eyes were bathed in tears, and I blessed the men and women who came to see me off, and whom I loved so much. My poor were there too, and that broke my heart. On arriving in Paris with my little furniture I went straight to M. de Bérulle." In a single year our saint had won all hearts.

## CHAPTER IV

### FIRST SOJOURN OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL IN THE FAMILY OF DE GONDI

1613-1617

THE De Gondi family was one of the most distinguished at the time Saint Vincent entered it. Besides their beautiful houses in Paris, they had seats at Montmirail, Joigny, Folleville, Dampierre and Villepreux. Spread over these vast estates were at least seven or eight thousand souls, whom Mme. de Gondi called her subjects. Altogether, in these establishments there was value from 1,500,000 to 1,800,000 livres, an enormous sum at the time, and besides that a revenue of at least 100,000 livres.

This family, originally from Florence, had grown in importance with each generation, and reached the zenith of its influence during the reigns of Henry III. and Henry IV., in the persons of Albert de Gondi and his brother Pierre, the former filling the highest offices in the State, and the latter the highest in the Church. Albert de Gondi, Marquis of Belle-Isle, Peer and Marshal of France, combined Italian finesse with an administrative capacity which gave him a foremost place in the councils of State; and his valour, born of his French spirit, made him a prominent figure on the battlefields of the time. In politics a Machiavelli, he acted more through worldly than through religious motives. Thus it was in the case of Saint-Barthélemy, where without



hesitation he sacrificed Henry of Navarre and Condé. Not being able to gain his point, because of the opposition of the illustrious Keeper of the Seals, De Tavannes, and recognising that the fortunes of Henry of Navarre were beginning to improve, with his Italian astuteness he joined the other side, counselling Henry III. to be reconciled to Henry of Navarre, and thus by attaching himself to the latter, gained more honours and offices than under the former. He died, April 21, 1602, and it was with his son, Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, of whom we are about to speak, that Saint Vincent now came into contact.

While Albert de Gondi was thus distinguishing himself in the State, his brother Pierre had a no less brilliant career in the Church. He was rapidly made Bishop of Langres in 1565, with the title and rank of a peer, then Bishop of Paris in 1570, Confessor of Charles IX., Chaplain to Queen Elizabeth of Austria, President of the Council, Commander of the Order of the Holy Spirit in 1578, and finally Cardinal in 1587. All Church matters passed through his hands, and he transacted them with the greatest adroitness, perhaps too much so, during the pontificates of Gregory XIII., Sixtus V., and Clement VIII. He was still living when Saint Vincent entered the family of his nephew Philippe-Emmanuel. Old and worn out with infirmities, he appointed as his coadjutor, in 1598, the brother of Philippe-Emmanuel, Henri de Gondi, who at the time was hardly twenty-six, and destined, like his uncle, to become cardinal. It is difficult not to recognise the influence of Saint Vincent on this young prelate, who by degrees withdrew from political life to entirely devote himself and his princely fortune towards the maintenance of the religious foundations of the seventeenth century.

Just as his uncle had chosen him, so too he, in his turn, selected as his coadjutor his own brother, Jean François de Gondî, at first a Capuchin, then Dean of Notre-Dame, and ultimately Archbishop of Paris. Here again, Jean François chose as his coadjutor, in 1642, his nephew, the son of Philippe-Emmanuel, and the pupil of Saint Vincent, Jean François Paul de Gondî, so well known as Cardinal de Retz. Thus we see Saint Vincent's surroundings when he came in contact with Philippe-Emmanuel. The De Gondis occupied the see of Paris for one hundred and nine years, that is to say, from 1570 to 1679—in other words, during the seventeenth century. We can now understand why God took from the little village of Clichy and led into a wider sphere of influence the future founder of so many holy works.

Of these cardinals all, except Pierre de Gondî, who was too old and hardly known to our saint, were under his influence, and all manifested by their love for works of charity and their zeal for the religious establishments of the seventeenth century, a similar disposition, which they undoubtedly owed to him. The first of these, Henri de Gondî, brother of Philippe-Emmanuel, devoted his immense revenues to supporting the Carmelites, the Ursulines, the Dominicans, and Augustinians; the Hospital of Charity, the Capuchins, the Nuns of the Visitation, of Notre-Dame de la Merci, the Irish College, and especially the Oratory, mainly supported by himself and his aunt the Marchioness of Meignelais. The second, François de Gondî, likewise a brother of Philippe-Emmanuel, coming a little later, when Saint Vincent was beginning his great works, fostered by every means in his power the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, and aided with his wealth and authority the erection of the seminaries of Saint-Nicolas

du Chardonnet and Saint-Lazare. Finally, the third, Cardinal de Retz, the pupil of our saint, had at heart, amid all the dissipation and intrigues of his political life, the education and instruction of the clergy. "I endeavoured," he wrote in his Memoirs, "to examine the capacity of the priests of the diocese of Paris, and undoubtedly this was of the greatest advantage. For that end I established examining boards composed of canons, curés and religious." Those priests who were found qualified were allowed to exercise their functions, but the others were sent to houses where they received the requisite instruction. "You may well understand," he continues, "that these establishments should cost a good deal, but money came in from all sides." <sup>1</sup>

Let us now make the acquaintance of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi and his pious wife Marguerite de Silly, with whom Saint Vincent was to spend twelve years. Philippe-Emmanuel, second son of Albert de Gondi, had succeeded his father at the age of seventeen, as Admiral of the Galleys and Lieutenant-General in command of the Levant. "He was," to quote the historians of the time, "the most renowned, the most successful and valiant man in the kingdom." Intimately connected with the Dukes of Guise and Chevreuse, with MM. de Créqui and de Bassompierre, he spent his life amid the pleasures and dissipations of the court, without, however, his uprightness and purity receiving the least stain. His piety suffered indeed, but only for a time, for later on it will be revived, and we shall see the Count still young, after the death of his wife, abandon all the pleasures and honours of this world, for an humble cell in the Oratory, under the direction of M. de Bérulle. Now, however, the world holds him captive.

<sup>1</sup> Chantelauze.

Like his mother, who was a Clermont, a woman of the highest character and passionately devoted to letters, knowing both Latin and Greek, the Count had inherited some of this literary taste. Historians even say "that he won as much glory by his pen as by his sword." A fine portrait of Philippe-Emmanuel by Corbinelli corresponds with these testimonies. "He had a noble head, and his finely carved features reflected the greatest sweetness; the eyes suggested meekness, the lips were slightly parted, and the nose was rather prominent. Yet there was nothing to remind one of his father, the intrepid Albert de Gondi, though we shall afterwards recognise his courage in his children."

About 1600, Philippe - Emmanuel, when hardly twenty, married Françoise-Marguerite de Silly, a woman of exceptional virtue and sweetness, whose solid piety was at the same time scrupulous and exalted. According to a portrait by Duflos, "she had a Grecian profile of the greatest purity and delicacy, and her eyes, somewhat soft and listless, looked as if she were absorbed in heavenly contemplation. By the delicacy of the lines and expression of her countenance, she is a true Madonna of Pérugino's."<sup>1</sup> We must say it to the honour of Philippe-Emmanuel, that he prized the treasure which God had given him, showing her reverence as well as love, and when she died he could only solace his grief by entering religion.

Three sons were born of this union, the three pupils of Saint Vincent.

The first, Pierre, born in Paris in 1602, and thus in his eleventh year when confided to Saint Vincent, was destined, like his ancestors, to fill an office in the State. Hardly twenty, he accompanied his father when the

<sup>1</sup> Chantelauze, p. 79.

latter was for the first time bringing the galleys through the Straits of Gibraltar, to join the King's forces before La Rochelle. Fighting bravely in the island of Ré, he was wounded in the shoulder and had his horse shot under him. All during life he was more a man of action than of diplomacy, possessing exceptional courage and indomitable determination.

The second, Henri de Gondi, destined for the Church, as sweet-tempered and pious as his mother, was pale and blond, unlike his brothers, whose dark complexion recalled their Florentine extraction. Ambitious as all the De Gondis were, even in his youth he was heard to say, "I wish to be a cardinal, to surpass my brother." This he should have been, had not death suddenly taken him away. He was killed in 1622 by a fall from his horse.

When Saint Vincent arrived at Montmirail, where the family were at the time, M. and Mme. de Gondi had only these two children; but a third was to be born, the future Cardinal de Retz. He came into the world on September 20, 1613, and received in baptism the name of François-Paul. Born during the Chapter-General of the Order of Malta, he was even in his cradle enrolled a chevalier. As a matter of fact, in the beginning his education was directed to this end; but when his brother destined for the Church was killed in the hunting-field, his parents suddenly changed their minds and wished François-Paul to take his place. "I do not believe," he wrote in his Memoirs, "there was a better-hearted man in the world than my father, who was truly virtuous. However, neither my duelling nor my frivolities was sufficient to deter him from sending me into the ecclesiastical state, though there was no one, perhaps, in the world less suited. His preference for my elder brother, and the prospect of the archbishopric which belonged



to our house, led him to this determination. He did not think so himself, and I would pledge my word that in his heart he was urged by no other motive than the fear he felt that any other profession would expose my soul to great danger." This is perfectly true, both on his father's side, and even still more so on his mother's; but such was the influence of the traditions at the time, that even the greatest souls could hardly escape.

Saint Vincent had a twofold office to fulfil with regard to the three children, namely, to teach them the fundamental principles of their religion, to know, love, and serve God, and at the same time to initiate them into Greek and Latin. Mme. de Gondî placed above everything else the first part of their education, and it was for this reason she said to M. de Bérulle, "I far prefer that my children should be great saints in heaven than great lords on earth."<sup>1</sup>

We might have had interesting details of the first lessons given by Saint Vincent, if the Memoirs of his third pupil, Cardinal de Retz, had been entirely preserved. Unfortunately the two hundred and fifty pages in which he relates his youth have been destroyed, though we know not by whom or for what object. It is indeed a heavy loss from a literary point of view, and absolutely irreparable from an historical.

If we may judge of the education of the two elder brothers by that of the younger, we can form some idea of the conduct of Saint Vincent de Paul. "Vincent de Paul," says an old historian, "instructed the future Cardinal de Retz in his studies, and he made wonderful progress. He learned as many as seven languages with great facility, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish,

<sup>1</sup> Collet, *Vie du Père de Gondî*.

German, and French, which he spoke with the greatest facility. He gained, amid universal applause, his doctorate at the Sorbonne. In reading his *Memoirs* we must recognise the excellence of his French. His Italian was not much inferior, and there remain many letters written in Latin, worthy of Bembo and Sadolet. He knew Greek so well that, while attending the Congregation of the Index, he translated with ease a book written in modern Greek. Finally, towards the end of his life, he read his breviary in Hebrew. Yet I do not speak here of that genius that sparkles in his *Memoirs*; of that vivid, familiar, yet dignified language, which shows the master-hand, in which are combined a Saint Simon and a Bossuet; for those are things not learned from any master, however eminent."

As to the moral and religious education Saint Vincent gave to his pupils, naturally so strong-willed, we can see that the eldest had not failed to profit by it. "Young as he was," says Corbinelli, "he had the mind, the courage, the piety, the prudence and maturity of a man." With regard to the second, killed while still young by a fall from his horse, who can tell the teaching which the saint had instilled into this young soul, and what faith and love of God he manifested when dying? The third,<sup>1</sup> it is true, passed his life in storms and dissipation, which, however, manifested the greatness of his genius, though also the regrettable strength of his passions. But historians have not told how these dissipations were often abandoned for a retreat in Saint-Lazare, and that in the end of his days he clearly showed that disgust for earthly things, which is known best by those who have lived to see their folly. He deserved the noble language which Bossuet

<sup>1</sup> Cardinal de Retz was only ten years old when Saint Vincent left the family of De Gondî.

applied to him: "That man so faithful to friends, so formidable to the State, of a character so great, that we cannot estimate it, fear it, love it, or hate it by halves—that mighty genius, which, by carrying all before it, won a position which in the end he wished to abandon as too dearly bought, and as incapable of satisfying his desires, for he saw his error and the emptiness of earthly grandeur. But while he was still seeking what one day he was to despise, he moved everything by secret and powerful springs, and after conquering all, he still seemed to stand alone, and still to menace the victorious favourite with his sad but fearless aspect."

It was, probably, in gratitude for all the services rendered to his children, and also in order the more to attach him to his house, that in 1615 M. de Gondi offered to Saint Vincent a canonry in the celebrated chapter of Éconis, in the diocese of Evreux. On the De Gondi estate there were many benefices which were in the power of the Count to confer, according to the custom of the time. He presented the first that became vacant to Saint Vincent. Not that he intended he should occupy it; for a substitute was arranged for, as the saint was to remain with the family. It was merely an honorary title which our saint could not decline. He took possession of it by proxy on May 27, 1615, and in person in the following September. We read in a registry of the old college chapel of Éconis, "that M. Vincent de Paul, priest, bachelor in theology, presented himself to take the oath of fidelity, and to give the kiss of peace, which were necessarily gone through, before a canon who had taken possession by proxy, could enter the choir in his vestments. Consequently M. Vincent de Paul took the oath, and promised to fulfil his duties; but

being obliged to live in Paris, he asked and obtained a substitute. After this he received the kiss of peace, and invited the chapter to dinner the next day, the feast of the dedication of Éconis, *pro suo jucundo adventu*, according to the custom.”<sup>1</sup> This is the only function that he fulfilled, for we never again hear of him in Éconis.

While Saint Vincent was labouring patiently at the education of his pupils, he unconsciously exercised a profound influence on their parents. It must be acknowledged, too, that they had never seen his equal. This holy man had made for himself a Thebaid in the Count's magnificent palace, and from that he only emerged when duty towards the children or business with their parents demanded it. With what respect he treated them! Full of faith, and accustomed to seek God in everything, he saw in M. de Gondi our Lord, and in Mme. de Gondi the Blessed Virgin. It is from himself we learn this. When one of his priests was about to spend some time with a great lord, he gave him some advice how to conduct himself worthily with regard to confession, communion, and holy mass said in presence of the lord. “There are,” he said, “some ceremonies at the end of mass which we must observe before distinguished people. After removing the chasuble, a salute is made to them, as I have seen his lordship of Geneva make to the Admiral of the Galleys. You are far below that holy prelate. It seems, too, that the corporal is brought to them to be kissed, and holy water sprinkled after mass; I never did it, but you can find out for yourself. I made it a maxim to regard M. de Gondi in God, and God in him, and to obey him in this spirit. Likewise I looked upon Mme. de Gondi as the Blessed Virgin, and only came into their presence when summoned, or

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. i. p. 87.

on urgent business. In the name of God, sir, do the same. As to the servants, honour them, and treat them kindly and with respect, sometimes speaking to them of God and holy things.”<sup>1</sup>

The result of all this was a sweet, recollected, humble, self-sacrificing deportment, which gave to his words an extraordinary charm.

But the humility of our saint did not prevent him from being firm. Of this we have a remarkable example. Philippe-Emmanuel had been insulted at court, and, notwithstanding his piety, felt that it was only due to himself, his name and his family, to remove the stain with his opponent's blood. But before fighting the duel, by one of those inconsistencies which are not uncommon, he went to hear mass, and remained a long time in prayer, recommending to God the issue of the duel and the salvation of his soul. It was Saint Vincent who said mass. Knowing the Count's intention, perhaps having been told by the Countess, when mass was over and all had retired, the saint went and knelt beside him. “Permit me, my lord,” said he to the Count, “to have a word with you. I understand you are about to fight a duel. I declare to you on the part of our Lord, whom you have been adoring, that if you do not abandon this wicked design, He will exercise His justice on you and your posterity.”<sup>2</sup> Moved by these words, M. de Gondi promised before the altar, to leave it to God to avenge him.

We may well understand that Mme. de Gondi was by no means the last to feel the perfume of sanctity that radiated from Saint Vincent de Paul. Timorous almost to being scrupulous, she yearned to open her mind to him, but dared not. She then had recourse to

<sup>1</sup> “Letters.”

<sup>2</sup> Abelly, vol. i. p. 30.



## IN THE FAMILY OF DE GONDI

M. de Bérulle, "praying him to compel this wise and virtuous priest to take care of her conscience, and to assist her with his advice. This the saint did in a spirit of obedience to him whom he regarded as the father of his soul, although in doing so his humility made him feel confused."<sup>1</sup> Under the guidance of her holy director, Mme. de Gondi made rapid progress. Too introspective and scrupulous, he drew her out of herself and applied her to works of charity. She visited the poor, comforted the sick, and went even to the most wretched hovels. Kind and gracious, she gave more by her very presence than by her purse, so that all the poor and dying were yearning to see her. She refused no one, till at last her strength gave way under such fatigue; and falling sick, she was at the point of death. It seems that Saint Vincent did not spare himself either, for his health was threatened; but he escaped, thanks to his robust constitution.

How we should wish to have the details of these charitable efforts made with such fervour by Mme. de Gondi and her holy director; but the humility of both was greater even than their charity. A single instance has escaped, which shows us the greatness of their charity, more solicitous for the soul than for the body. At this time the De Gondis were at their seat in Folleville, near Amiens. One evening Saint Vincent was asked to hear a dying peasant's confession. "Although this man," says Abelly, "had always lived like a Christian, the saint found his conscience loaded with mortal sins, which through shame he had always concealed. While Saint Vincent was on his way to the house, it occurred to him that it would be safer for the dying man to make a general confession. The result shows

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. i. p. 30.

that this thought was from God; for Mme. de Gondi arriving shortly afterwards, the dying man of his own free will acknowledged his having made sacrilegious confessions. The virtuous lady," continues Abelly, "was dumfounded, and exclaimed to Saint Vincent, 'Ah, sir, what is this? Unquestionably it is the same way with other poor people. If this man who was regarded as good, was in a state of damnation, what will it be with others who are looked upon as bad? Ah, M. Vincent, how souls are lost! What can we do to remedy matters?'"

Mme. de Gondi begged our saint to preach the following Sunday on general confessions. "God," says Saint Vincent, "was so pleased with the faith and confidence of this lady (for the number and enormity of my sins would destroy the fruit of the discourse), that He poured down special blessings on it." He touched all their hearts so much, that all came to make general confessions. "We afterwards went to other villages belonging to the Countess," continues the saint, "and there too we had like success. Behold the first sermon of the mission, and the success which God bestowed upon it, on the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, January 25, 1617—a day not indeed without a special design of Providence."<sup>1</sup>

This event made a deep impression on Mme. de Gondi, who immediately placed in reserve a sum of 16,000 livres, to offer it to a Congregation that would agree to give missions every five years in the villages belonging to her. At first she applied it to the Jesuits and Oratorians, but they refused. In the end, not knowing where to turn, she made a will by which she left the above sum to Saint Vincent, to found missions where and as he pleased. As for him he ever affectionately remem-

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. i, pp. 33, 34.

bered that day, and always celebrated its anniversary. He little thought, however, that that first mission was as it were the beginning of all the others, the seed of a Congregation destined to evangelise the poor country people, and for that reason called the Congregation of the Mission.

Was it this mission of Folleville that rekindled in the heart of Saint Vincent his passionate love of the poor? Or was it a desire for a more hidden life? However it was, a sudden and new change came about. Suddenly, Saint Vincent left Montmirail and the family of De Gondi, with the intention of not returning. He did not dare to say so, but made a short visit to Paris his pretext for leaving, and wrote from that city to M. de Gondi. When the letter reached the Count, our saint was far away in the heart of Bresse, in a small and poor village called Châtillon-les-Dombes.

When we seek a reason for this extraordinary act on the part of so prudent a man, we come in contact with a great saint's delicacy of soul. During the five years he had been with the family of De Gondi, Saint Vincent saw that a sort of veneration was growing up around him. They treated as a saint him who called himself a "wretch." He felt, therefore, that he should find some place where he was unknown, and could live in the greatest obscurity. Moreover, Mme. de Gondi was placed under his direction, and experienced under his guidance an inexpressible peace. Pious almost to scrupulosity, ever fearing to offend God, she felt that she could no longer do without her director. She wished to have him always near her. From time to time he compelled her to confess to another, and forced her to acknowledge that she had received consolation. She obeyed, and was thankful for the benefit to her soul, but returned

with all the more eagerness to her holy director. Seeing this, Saint Vincent feared that he might be the unintentional cause of retarding her progress in perfection. After the example of our Lord, who said to His apostles, "It is good for you that I go," and knowing that Mme. de Gondi was capable of the highest detachment, he resolved to leave her house.

It would seem that the question of the education of the children had weight with him also. They were growing up, the eldest was already fifteen, and our saint thought that a "poor scholar of the fourth form," as in his humility he called himself, was incapable of giving "to these three young noblemen" an education suitable to the exalted positions they were afterwards to occupy. Moreover, these children were "veritable imps," as the Marchioness of Maignelais laughingly remarked.

They little resembled their father or mother. On the contrary, we recognise in them all the passion, the ambition and genius of their grandfather, Marshal de Retz, and of their grand-uncle, the first Cardinal de Gondi. Between their fathers and their children, Philippe-Emmanuel and his pious wife were as doves among vultures.

Let us add as an additional motive for the saint's departure, that the peace of the family was troubled by political events. Civil war was in the streets, and had penetrated into the very houses. Concini, so famous as Marshal d'Ancre, was killed when leaving the Louvre on April 24, 1617. His wife, after witnessing the noblest being murdered, was herself burned on July 8, in the Place de Grève.

Mary de Medicis was sent into exile. The house of De Gondi, of Florentine extraction, naturally became the centre of the most heated political passion. This was distasteful to Saint Vincent. He thirsted for peace,

silence, humility and forgetfulness of these agitations ; for some quiet place where he should hear only of God and the poor. However, he did nothing without consulting M. de Bérulle, so, relating the motives we have been speaking of, he explained to him the requirements of his soul. M. de Bérulle, seeing himself in presence of a man who was guided by the highest motives of faith, and who, as he believed, was urged by a special providence of God, particularly in this matter of giving missions to the poor country-people, gave his consent for Vincent's departure. Thus Saint Vincent left the house of De Gondi, happy in forgetting that great world which was so agitated, and in finding himself once more in the midst of his dear poor. He arrived in Châtillon-les-Dombes early in 1617, and was installed as curé on August 1.



## CHAPTER V

SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL CURÉ OF CHÂTILLON-LES-DOBES  
—HE BEGINS TO EMPLOY WOMEN, THEN MEN, IN THE  
SERVICE OF THE POOR—HE RETURNS TO THE FAMILY  
OF DE GONDI—DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHARITIES

1617-1621

SAINT VINCENT had, so to speak, fled from the house of De Gondi. He set out, giving as a pretext for his journey business in Paris, but without telling anybody that he would not return. Hence, his first care as soon as he was installed in Châtillon was to write to M. de Gondi, who at the time was in command of the royal galleys off Provence. In explanation of his departure, he merely adduced his incapacity to give suitable education and instruction to his children. We may guess the astonishment and grief of M. de Gondi. Constantly away campaigning, and mixed up with all the political strife of the time, he felt at ease in knowing there was in his house a priest of such exalted virtue and solid judgment. But what greater astonishment and what keener grief was that of Mme. de Gondi! For herself, in the direction of her delicate conscience, for the education of her three children, and later on for her husband's conversion from worldliness, she had great need of Saint Vincent. He alone was capable of doing all this. Some fragments of letters which were exchanged at this time are preserved, and they are admirable. This is how M. de Gondi breaks the news to his pious wife: "I am in

despair at a letter which M. Vincent has written to me, and which I am sending you to see if there is any way of avoiding the misfortune of losing him. I am extremely surprised that he had said nothing to you of his determination, and that you did not know of it. I beg of you to do everything that we may not lose him, for even if what he says of his incapacity were true, it would not prevail with me. Nothing is of such consequence as our own salvation and that of our children, towards which I feel certain he could one day powerfully aid, and also towards the resolutions I have often spoken to you about, and which I desire more than ever to be able to take. I have not yet answered his letter, and I shall wait till I hear from you. Do you think the intervention of my sister Mme. Raguy, who is not far from him, would be of any advantage? I believe there will be nobody more influential than M. de Bérulle. Tell him, if even M. Vincent is not fitted to teach youth, he can have an assistant; but in any case I must have him back in my house, where he can live as he pleases, and I perhaps as I ought to live, if he is with me."

Mme. de Gondi received this letter on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14, 1617. She was quite overcome, continually crying and unable to eat or sleep.<sup>1</sup> "I should never have thought it," said she to one of her friends; "M. Vincent was so charitable to my soul that I could not think he would abandon me in this way. However, God be praised! I will not accuse him—far from it; I believe he does nothing but by the special providence of God, and urged by His holy love. But, in truth, his departure is very strange, and I confess I cannot understand it. He knows the need I have of his guidance, and the affairs I have to

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. i. p. 39.

confer with him about, the pain of mind and body I suffer for want of assistance, the good I am anxious to do among my people, and which it is impossible to undertake without his advice. In a word, I feel my soul in a most pitiable state." And showing her husband's letter to her friend, she added: "You see with what regret the Admiral writes to me. I know my children will grow worse daily, and all the good he was accomplishing in the house, and to the seven or eight thousand on our estates is now at an end. What! Are not these souls as dearly bought with the precious blood of our Lord as those of Bresse? Are they not as dear to Him? Truly, I do not know how M. Vincent looks at it, but I feel certain that I ought to neglect no means of bringing him back. He only seeks the greater glory of God, and I wish for nothing against the Divine will. I beseech God with all my heart to restore him, and I pray the Blessed Virgin, and I would beg of her still more earnestly were it not that my own interests are bound up with those of my children, my family and subjects." Nothing is more beautiful than those letters. M<sup>me</sup>. de Gondi went at once to M. de Bérulle to disclose her grief, her needs, and the delicate scruple she had of acting against the will of God in endeavouring to recall M. Vincent. M. de Bérulle reassured her, and admiring the sensitiveness of that Christian soul, urged her to write herself to the saint. Behold how she did so: "My anguish is insupportable without an extraordinary grace, which I do not merit. If it were only for a time, I should not have so much difficulty; but when I think of all the occasions when I shall want assistance, direction and advice, in life and at death, my sorrows are renewed. Think you, can my mind and body endure these pains for any length of time? I am not fit to seek or receive

assistance elsewhere, for you know how I am situated. M. de Bérulle promised me to write to you, and I beseech God and the Blessed Virgin to send you back for the salvation of our family and of many others, towards whom you might exercise your charity. I implore you once more, practise this charity towards us for the love you bear our Lord, to whose will I submit now, notwithstanding the great fear I have of being unable to persevere. If after this you refuse me, I will accuse you before God of whatever evil happens to me, and of the omission of the good I shall be unable to do for want of assistance. You make me run the risk of often being deprived of the sacraments, and of being exposed to severe trials without any assistance. You see that the Admiral has the same desire as myself, which God alone in His mercy gives him. Do not turn away from the good you can do by assisting towards his salvation, since he may one day in his turn assist many others. I know that by my life I only offend God, but my soul requires assistance at the hour of death. Remember the distress you saw me in during my late illness in the village. I am in a worse state now, and the very fear of it frightens me so much, that I am afraid, without watchfulness, it may cause my death.”<sup>1</sup>

Saint Vincent was deeply moved by this letter. He fell on his knees and implored God to make known His holy will. He visited the Blessed Sacrament, and many times offered the adorable sacrifice to obtain light; but although his soul was most sensitive to the movements of grace, he felt no supernatural attraction to return. The work for which he had come to Châtillon was not yet accomplished.

After writing to Mme. de Gondi in order to console

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. i. p. 39.

her, and to urge her to seek only the holy will of God, he set about the sanctification of his parish. If this was in a sad state, it was not for want of priests. There were six priests in this parish of two or three thousand souls, but they were far from being exemplary, seldom occupying themselves with their spiritual charge, but rather scandalising the town by their indolence. What was to be done to remove so much bad example? Saint Vincent sweetly insinuated himself into their confidence, and ended by inducing them "to band together in a kind of community, so as to give themselves the more perfectly to God and the Church. He persuaded them to do this, and they continued so for a long time afterwards, to the great edification of the whole parish."<sup>1</sup> At the same time he was devoting himself to catechising the children, the only means of radically reforming a parish; to teaching the ignorant, who abounded in consequence of the almost total absence of instruction; to converting heretics, whom the neighbourhood of Geneva had multiplied; and to withdrawing from their frivolous and dissipated life the gentry, who lived in the castles and surrounding towns. We shall see later on that the voice of Saint Vincent was one of the most eloquent of the seventeenth century. In the pulpit, in the confessional, by the sick-bed, everywhere he triumphed. Here he worked wonders. We may mention in particular Count Rougemont, a notorious duellist, and so skilled, that his victims were innumerable. Hearing of the saint, he came to the church at Châtillon to listen. His faith was awakened, and he fell at the knees of the holy priest, who henceforth had more to do in restraining his piety than in exciting it. He sold his Rougemont estate, and devoted the money to the foun-

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. i, p. 38.



dation of monasteries and the relief of the poor. Saint Vincent had to prevent him from disposing of the remainder of his property ; otherwise, said the saint, before a month the man would not possess an inch of land, like our Saviour, who had not a place to lay His head. "I am breaking, rending and destroying everything," said he to Saint Vincent, "and will go to heaven stript of all things." However, his sword, the last, the dearest of his human attachments still remained ; for he could not bring himself to cast it away. One day, while riding, shame at such cowardice seized him. He stopped his horse, dismounted, drew his sword, and broke it in a thousand pieces on a stone ; then remounting, he exclaimed, "Now I am free."

Another conversion created no less astonishment. Two young ladies, Mme. de Chassigne and Mme. de Brie, gifted with beauty and fortune, were living a life of pleasure, gaiety and general dissipation. It happened that they entered the church while Saint Vincent was preaching. Both were moved by his words, and on exchanging their sentiments, determined to go together to the holy priest. In a few words the saint perfected his work, and they left him, resolved to renounce the vanities of their worldly life and to devote themselves to the service of the poor. This pledge they fulfilled in an heroic degree during the terrible epidemic that decimated Châtillon a short time afterwards.

We might dwell on other conversions ; that of a young and rich Protestant, M. Bergnier, with whom, for the want of a presbytery, Saint Vincent was staying, and whose hospitality he repaid with the gift of faith ; that of his brother-in-law, an old soldier of the Duke of Montpensier, and others. But we must hasten on to the great event which, in the order of Divine Providence,

was the only reason perhaps for Saint Vincent's coming to Châtillon.

One day as the saint was vested, about to say mass, Mme. de Chassaigne asked him to recommend to the charity of the parishioners a poor family, all the members of which were ill in a house half a league from Châtillon. He spoke on their behalf with his usual earnestness and sympathy, and in the afternoon he set out, accompanied by one of his parishioners, to visit the afflicted people. As they went along he was agreeably surprised to meet a number of persons who had been moved by his words returning from the house, whither they had brought assistance. "Behold," said he, "noble but ill-regulated charity. These poor people, provided with too much now, must allow some to perish, and then they shall be in want just as before."

He brought Mme. de Chassaigne and Mme. de Brie, pointed out the inconvenience of charity so ill-regulated, and asked them to assist him in bringing together some piously inclined ladies. "I suggested to them," says the saint, "to club together to do the needful every day, not only for this poor family, but for others that might turn up in future. Behold," he adds, "the beginning of the Association of Charity."<sup>1</sup>

With that sound sense and spirit of organisation which characterised him, he employed the ladies of the parish in this work for three months without written rules, and it was only after seeing how they worked that he drew up the rules. A happy accident brought to light only a few years ago, February 20, 1839, in the archives of Châtillon, the autograph book of rules, the first which the saint had written, and which was

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences aux Filles de la Charité.*

stamped with the seal of that consummate prudence which he always manifested.

He began by pointing out the end of this institution, and we must at once remark his deep humility in attributing to others all the honour of its initiation. "Charity towards the neighbour being one of the infallible marks of the true children of God, and one of its principal exercises being to visit and comfort the sick poor, some pious young ladies and good people of Châtillon-les-Dombes, in the diocese of Lyons, desirous of being true children of God, have come together in order to assist spiritually and temporally their fellow townspeople, who sometimes suffer more for want of order than from want of charitable persons. But since there is danger that after beginning this good work, it should perish in a short time, if the members have not some union and spiritual bond between them, they are anxious to join in a body that can be formed into an association with the following rules. Everything, however, must be done with the consent of their worthy prelate the Archbishop, to whom the entire work is subject." When the work was established he named it. "The said association shall style itself the 'Association of Charity,' and its members the 'Servants of the Poor' or 'Ladies of Charity.' Their patron shall be our Lord, who loved the poor so much. Every Christian woman, widows as well as the married and single, who are pious and virtuous, can become members, provided, however, that wives and daughters have the consent of their husbands or parents, and not otherwise." Thus there is nothing secret or hidden, everything is open to broad daylight.

The work once begun, he established a form of government. In the first place there was to be a

president, elected by the members, "whom they should love and respect as a mother, obeying her in everything that regarded the welfare and service of the poor, and all for the love of our Lord, who became obedient unto death, and that the death of the Cross." To assist the president, two of the most prudent and humble of the association were to act as assistant and treasurer. And as it was not becoming that women alone should have charge of the funds of the association, they should elect as bursar some ecclesiastic or pious layman of the town, devoted to the welfare of the poor, and not embarrassed with business. This person should be regarded as a member of the association, participate in the indulgences that would be granted to it, assist at its meetings, and have a vote like the others while bursar, but no longer. All, however, president, treasurer, assistant, and bursar, were to be subject to the curé or his vicar, so that everything would be carried on for the benefit of the parish and not wasted.

A wholesome advice is addressed to the treasurer. "The treasurer shall keep the money, papers and goods, and render her account on Pentecost Monday of each year, in presence of the curé, president, bursar, and assistant; and this report shall be accepted without investigation, such being the integrity of the treasurer and the confidence placed in her, that no one would attempt to cross-examine it even if afforded an opportunity."

But where the saint excels is in his directions how to treat the poor. The Ladies of Charity shall visit only those whose case has been examined and passed by the president, assistant, and treasurer; and then this is how they are to act. "The lady who visits shall get the nourishment from the treasurer, cook it, and bringing it to the invalids, cheerfully and kindly salute them on

entering their apartment. She shall arrange the tray on the bed, spreading a napkin over it, and placing on it a glass, spoon, and bread-roll. Next she shall wash the sick person's hands, say Grace, and then having poured out the soup and put the meat on a plate, she shall arrange all on the tray. She shall kindly invite the sick person to eat, for the love of Jesus Christ and His Blessed Mother, doing all in a spirit of love, as if dealing with her own child, or rather with God Himself, who regards as done to Himself what is done to the poor. While conversing in this spirit about our Lord, she shall try to cheer the invalid if downcast, cutting his food and pouring out the drink. Thus having set things going, if there is any one at hand she shall leave the rest to him, and go on to the next sick person, whom she shall treat in the same way. She shall remember always to begin with those who have somebody to help them, and to finish with those who have nobody, so as to be able to remain a longer time with them. In the evening she shall return with the supper, and go through the same arrangements as before.

"Each invalid shall receive as much bread as is necessary, with a quarter of a pound of mutton or boiled veal for dinner, and as much roast for supper, except on Sundays and feasts, when boiled chicken shall be given, and two or three times a week minced pie. Those who have no fever may get a pint of wine every day, half in the morning and half in the evening.

"And since the object of this institution is not only to assist the poor corporally, but also spiritually, the members shall endeavour and make it their aim to dispose those whom they succour to lead better lives, and prepare for death those who are dying, directing their visits to this end, and frequently asking God in prayer



for the same object. The dead shall be buried at the expense of the association, the ladies obtaining a shroud and purchasing a grave, if the deceased had no means. They shall assist at the funerals if convenient, acting as mothers who follow their children to the grave."

What thoughtfulness ! The members were to serve the invalid with love, as if their own child ; always to begin with those who had some one to help them, so as to remain the longer with those who had none ; and to assist at the funerals, like a mother at the grave of her child. What delicacy of feeling was this !

Saint Vincent then lays down that the meetings shall be held every month, when the curé shall briefly give an exhortation for the spiritual advancement of the members. Next he points out the spiritual exercises for each ; among others, "those who can, shall read every day, slowly and attentively, a chapter from the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, raising their hearts to God before beginning, in order to implore His grace to derive profit from this holy exercise."

He had these rules approved by the Archbishop of Lyons, and then solemnly gave them in this form on Dec. 8, 1617, the feast of the Immaculate Conception : "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, feast of the Immaculate Conception, I, Vincent de Paul, priest and unworthy curé of Châtillon-les-Dombes, having shown the Rules to M. Faye, the Vicar-General of the diocese, the Archbishop has approved of them. By virtue of this approbation we have to-day erected the association, having previously made known its nature and its end, namely, to assist the sick poor of the town, both spiritually and corporally." Then appealing to those present who were anxious to join, the following presented themselves : F. Baschet, Charlotte Brie, G. Puget, F. Gomard,

Denise Benier, P. Mulger, Catherine Patissier, J. Perra, Florence Gomard (daughter of Denis Gomard), B. Prost, and T. Guyac.

"Next proceeding to the election of officers, the following were chosen : president, Mdlle. Baschet ; treasurer, Mdlle. Charlotte Brie ; assistant, Mme. Puget ; and honourable bursar, Jean Benier. The election took place on Dec. 12, 1617, in the hospital chapel, and the votes are recorded below. Signed, Vincent de Paul."

Thus was formally constituted the first association of charity founded by Saint Vincent de Paul. For the first time was organised the visitation of the poor and sick by ladies of the world, free from every bond and vow, still living in their homes, and only visiting the poor with the consent of their husbands, fathers, or mothers. Thus was united domestic duty with external charity.

With the first stroke Saint Vincent had accomplished a masterpiece. He did not disregard the venerable Hôtel-Dieu, carried on by enclosed religious, so necessary for the destitute and sick, and a work in which he himself co-operated afterwards. But side by side and in conjunction with it, he had the visitation of the poor by ladies of the world. God blessed this pious undertaking, and at present it is spread all over the world.

Meanwhile, Mme. de Gondi was not resigned to the absence of her holy director, and increased her endeavours to get him back. She requested and obtained the most pressing letters from her husband for this end, from her brother-in-law Henri de Gondi, Archbishop of Paris, and from Père de Bérulle. To deliver these letters she deputed one of her most intimate friends, M. du Fresne, who had introduced Saint Vincent to Queen Margaret, and who himself was brought by the saint as secretary to the De Gondis. This kind and good

man fulfilled his mission with such delicacy, prudence and persuasiveness, that it ended in Saint Vincent yielding. The argument which seemed to weigh most with him was, that the good he was doing at Châtillon was necessarily limited, and that after having founded the association of charity nothing more was wanting. On the other hand, if he returned to the De Gondi family, he might, aided by their patronage and wealth, extend and multiply the charitable works which he contemplated, not only among the seven or eight thousand on their estate, but also in Paris and elsewhere. This was clear. Saint Vincent, attracted by the prospect of the hidden life, prayed fervently, went to consult Father Bence of the Oratory at Lyons, and ended by entrusting to M. du Fresne two letters, one for the Admiral and the other for his wife, in which he announced his approaching visit to Paris, and his intention of leaving everything in the hands of M. de Bérulle.

We shall say nothing of the deep affliction of the people of Châtillon on hearing that they were about to lose their curé. The scenes at Clichy were renewed. At the first mention from the pulpit of his departure, sobs were heard. The same evening he distributed among his dear poor, whom he was especially sorry to leave, his clothes and whatever else he possessed. They valued the slightest souvenir, and one of them, Julien Caron, was quite besieged while guarding an old hat.

The day he left, the whole parish turned out. When he appeared, all fell on their knees and cried out, "Your blessing," which the saint gave with tears in his eyes. Almost fifty years afterwards, witnesses of this scene, or their children and grandchildren, declared on oath, with a view to his canonisation, that it would be impossible to relate all Saint Vincent did in so short

a time (five months), and they would hardly believe it, had they not seen and heard it. Such was their esteem for him that they spoke of him only as a saint. They were convinced that what he had accomplished at Châtillon was sufficient for his canonisation, which they had no doubt should one day take place.

Saint Vincent arrived in Paris, December 23, 1617. In the evening he visited M. de Bérulle, and on Christmas day, 1617, returned to the family of De Gondi, only to leave it eight years afterwards, at the age of fifty, ready, after so long a preparation, to accomplish his greatest works.

The first act of Mme. de Gondi in her joy, was to make Saint Vincent promise that he would leave no more, as if she had a presentiment of her approaching end, so that he might assist her on her deathbed. Some historians are of opinion that from his return he was no longer charged with the education of the children. But this assertion is not supported by any kind of proof; on the contrary, M. de Gondi insisted on the saint's return for the sake of his influence over himself and his children. However, it is possible that some ecclesiastic or pious laic assisted him, so that while retaining the supervision of their education, he could freely devote himself to works of charity, towards which he felt more and more attracted.

The second sojourn of Saint Vincent among the poor terminated by their winning his heart, and revealing his special vocation. Châtillon was a revelation to him, and he received there a light which he had not at Clichy. What had been done in the little town of Bresse, why was it not done everywhere? Why not at least try in the thirty or forty villages on the De Gondi property? Missions to instruct the poor, and associa-

tions of charity to soothe their pains—that is what he meditated, and to that he resolved to consecrate whatever time and strength God should give him. Mme. de Gondi listened with astonishment. She was delighted at the return of her director; but how much more so when she saw him holier than ever, filled with love for those poor country-people, whom she herself loved so much. She offered to assist him, by her influence, wealth and very person, in establishing these charities. Thus supported, Saint Vincent set to work, and in two or three years established the association in thirty or forty villages on the De Gondi estate, after the missions which he usually gave himself. Mme. de Gondi used to be the first to give in her name, and thus drew everybody by her example. She was not satisfied with heading the list of the association, but would establish it in the villages before the missionaries came, visiting the poor and sick, and urging the people to make good use of the mission. It was worthy of tears to see this noble lady, so young, so delicate, so wealthy, sister-in-law or niece of several cardinals, showing such an heroic example of piety and charity.

She did not, however, remain alone, for terrible misfortunes caused to be associated with her in the service of the poor and sick, her husband's sister, Margaret de Gondi, Marchioness of Meignelais. She was the widow, in her twentieth year, of the heroic Marquis of Meignelais, whom she passionately loved, and whom the Duke of Mayenne had stabbed, because he suspected him to be an adherent of Henry IV. Shortly afterwards losing her only son, she entirely gave herself up to God and works of charity. "This young and beautiful woman, intelligent and fascinating, exchanged her costly silk and satin for coarse grey



wool. Her head was closely veiled, her mantle the simplest, and for her diamonds she wore a cross of Saint Francis." She excluded all luxury, delicacy and superfluity from her house, and dispensed with all that ceremony which belongs to ladies of her rank, consisting of numerous attendants and costly equipage. She retained only a single carriage, which she had lined with coarse wool, and would have dispensed with it too, only it was shown to be necessary to enable her to visit the prisons and Hôtel-Dieu. "She sold her plate, her jewelry, her very rings and all the most precious things she had, not even keeping a mirror.<sup>1</sup> The most abandoned poor were to her the dearest, especially prisoners. She kissed their chains, and assisted those condemned to death with incomparable tenderness."

Her piety together with her sorrow would have led her very far, and she would have hid herself under the veil of a daughter of Saint Francis; had not her uncle Cardinal de Gondi, her confessor M. de Bérulle, and even Paul V., decided that a person who expended all her rent-roll, 350,000 livres, an enormous sum at that time, in works of charity, would do more good in the world than in the cloister. Hence the Pope forbade her ever to think of entering religion. She submitted, but to compensate for it she gave herself might and main to works of charity. Worthy sister-in-law of Mme. de Gondi, and both noble helpmates of Saint Vincent de Paul!

We have no details concerning the thirty associations of charity founded in this first fervour. It is even with difficulty four or five are brought to light. The first was founded at Villepreux, in a village belonging to the De Gondis. It was approved in 1618 by the first Cardinal de

<sup>1</sup> Chantelauze, p. 151.

Retz, uncle of Mme. de Gondi, and probably received the same rules as the foundation at Châtillon. The association at Joigny was established the same year, but with greater solemnity. Joigny was the principal seat of the De Gondi family. From it they took their title, and there they had a magnificent house, where they usually spent the autumn. Saint Vincent used this sojourn in giving a most successful mission to the little town, and at its close founded the association of charity. Mme. de Gondi wrote herself to the Archbishop of Sens for the necessary authorisation, and on September 6, 1618, in the chapel of Saint-Antoine, she, accompanied by some of the most distinguished ladies, in presence of the mayor, sheriffs and others, presented the Archbishop's letter, and was the first to inscribe her name on the list of members, and by her example attracted all the others. Saint Vincent said a few words and gave the rules, which were a résumé of those of Châtillon and Villepreux.

Two months afterwards, while M. and Mme. de Gondi were stopping at their seat at Montmirail, Saint Vincent took the opportunity, November 1618, of founding the third association of charity. Here again it was Mme. de Gondi who applied to the Bishop of Soissons, praying him "to establish the association at Montmirail, in the vicinity, and all through his diocese, and to place the aforesaid establishment under M. Vincent, priest, bachelor of theology, and her chaplain." This permission was granted, but the rules given by our saint have never been discovered.

In the following year, while the De Gondis were at Folleville, in the diocese of Amiens, the association was at once established with the approbation of the Bishop. As usual, Mme. de Gondi's name was at the head of the list of the servants of the poor.

It was here, at this period of the foundations, that a courageous and happy enterprise was undertaken. Hitherto the saint had only employed women in the service of the poor, and it was at Folleville that the idea struck him—we do not know on what occasion—of also employing men. The undertaking was risky, particularly in a small village ; but the Admiral, who was also lord of the place, being the first to give his name, drew all by his example. We possess the rules of this first association of men, and they are the original of many others discovered since. The general plan is somewhat the same as the ladies' association, and the members bore the same name—servants of the poor. Their patron was the same—our Lord, who loved the poor so much ; and their object was the same—to fulfil the great wish of His heart, namely, that we should “love one another as He has loved us.” The men were to have charge of the healthy poor, the children, the young people and the old, leaving the care of the sick to the women, who are more suited to them.

To this association of men, with the same patron, object and spiritual functions, he gave an almost similar form of government. The members were to elect three from among themselves every two years. The first was to be the president ; the second the treasurer, who would keep the funds of the association in a safe, having two keys, one for the president and the other for himself, and to be opened only in presence of the curé. The third was called the visitor, whose duty it was to go through the parish finding out the deserving poor, the widows, orphans and prisoners, and afterwards to report them to the association, in order that they might be visited and assisted.

Saint Vincent was so successful in this innovation

that he hastened to establish it at Joigny, where already there was the ladies' association. It was the Count who took the initiative and obtained the necessary authorisation. The Archbishop granted full power to "M. Vincent, priest, bachelor of theology, and the Count's chaplain." M. de Gondi, on the day of the foundation, May 30, 1621, was the first to inscribe his name, and after his example, his officers, the aldermen, lawyers, and the principal townspeople did the same. Saint Vincent wrote a few words at the bottom of the list, which is preserved as a precious autograph.

Although employing men in the service of the poor was a successful and courageous undertaking, yet so far it had nothing very original, its rules being those of the ladies' association adapted to men. But beginning in this way, Saint Vincent had taken a step forward. In employing ladies he only required them to comfort the sick and to lighten their burden, but from the men he hoped for greater things. To assist the poor was good, but could not mendicity be put down? Poverty arising from youth that could not yet work, or from age that could no longer work; from sickness that took away strength, or from accidents that paralysed the limbs—undoubtedly we could never take sufficient care of such as those. But were there not poor who could work and would not, idlers who preferred to beg, sluggards who were a disgrace and a menace to society? Why support such? To give to them, was it not to encourage vice and rob the real poor? In well-organised society there would always be poor, but never beggars. The poor would always be succoured, the beggars would never be tolerated.

This is what the wisdom of Saint Vincent de Paul foresaw two centuries before our modern philosophers,

and what he treated with the greatest statesmanship. He divided the poor into three classes : 1. Those who could not gain their livelihood, such as children, the aged, cripples, the sick, and to those the association was to give everything that was necessary. 2. There were those who could only earn half their support, and they were to receive the other half. 3. To those who could only earn a quarter, the association was to give the other three-quarters. Outside of those three classes there remained only the strong and healthy, who could work, and who, if they did not, should be discountenanced and refused all assistance. For this end the good priest did not hesitate to appeal to the mayors and corporations.

Let us hear him : "The association is instituted for the spiritual and corporal assistance of the poor of the towns and surrounding villages—spiritually, by teaching Christian doctrine and piety ; and corporally, by procuring employment for those who could work, and assisting those who could not. In this way they fulfilled the command of God, in the fifteenth chapter of Deuteronomy, enjoining us so to act that '*there shall be no poor nor beggar among you.*' The number of the poor having been ascertained, and each having received aid proportionate to his want, 'they were prohibited from begging, under penalty of having the aid withdrawn, and the public were forbidden to give alms.'"

As to tramps, he established for them what are now known as night refuges. Here these poor people were received, given a supper and lodging, and the next morning they were sent away with two sous each.

To undertake this great work of aiding the poor according to their necessity, and of putting down begging in the streets, resources were necessary. Saint Vincent



little felt this want when founding the ladies' association, for they easily gathered the money. It was not so with the men ; and moreover, their association was a bigger work. Witness and admire his plans. When the association was established in a country town or village made up of labourers, he wished it to possess sheep and cattle, which should get free grazing. Each member was to take in one or two head of cattle, rear them out of charity, and the proceeds were to go to the poor. "The association shall have sheep," says one of the rules, "which shall be distributed among the members, who shall rear them through charity for the association, some more and some less, according to each one's means, and the lambs shall be sold every year by the visitor, about the feast of Saint John. The money shall be handed over to the treasurer, in presence of the president and the curé ; and they shall mark the sheep with the seal of the association when renewing them every five years." In all this we can recognise the one time shepherd-boy of Dax.

When the association passed from the country to the town this scheme was impracticable ; but the saint immediately devised another. This was work-shops, humble trades, so well organised that all, even the children, the convalescent, and the young men, could gain a livelihood. Let us listen to his sound common-sense, joined to such tender charity : "The poor are either little children from four to eight, or boys from eight to fifteen or twenty ; or they are grown up, but helpless or old, who can earn only a part of their livelihood ; or finally, they are the decrepit, who can do nothing. The association shall give every week, to the children, the feeble and decrepit, whatever is necessary for them. To those who can earn a part of their livelihood, it shall give the other

part. The young boys shall be put at humble trades, such as weaving, which only costs three or four crowns for an apprentice ; or better still, they shall erect a manufactory for some light work, as woollen socks. They shall gather the young fellows into a suitable hired house, where they shall reside and be trained under a master-worker according to the present arrangement."

"Under the supreme control of the association, two persons shall be appointed over the manufactory, one an ecclesiastic, the other the master-worker. It shall be the office of the ecclesiastic to teach Christian doctrine and piety to the apprentices and the poor, on feast days after vespers in the church, and on Tuesdays and Fridays at home, about ten o'clock, for an hour at least. He shall conduct the apprentices in order, two by two, to mass and vespers on Sundays and holidays, and on Saturdays and the vigils of great feasts to vespers, bringing them back in the same order. He shall see that the apprentices, as well as those who receive relief, go to confession and communion on the first Sunday of every month and on great feasts. He shall assist at the meals, and shall not absent himself nor receive an apprentice without the consent of the officers of the association of charity.

"The duty of the master-worker shall be to teach his trade to the apprentices whom the association sends, and he shall not, for any reason whatever, either take in or send away an apprentice without the permission of the association, which has full control."

Everything was to be done gratuitously. The only recompense which Saint Vincent required, further exemplifies his charity. The apprentices, with their parents' consent, shall pledge themselves to teach their trade gratis to the poor children of the town, whom the

association will send to them, but the association shall continue to support these children.

The saint next makes out the order of the day for the manufactory, where the children were to be brought up temperately and strong, and not degraded and materialised as in modern institutions :—

4	A.M., Rising.	12,	Dinner.
4.30	„ Morning Prayer.	3.30 P.M.,	<i>Gouté.</i>
5	„ Work.	7	„ Supper, Recreation.
6.30	„ Mass.	7.45	„ Night Prayer.
8	„ Dejeuner.	8	„ Retire to Rest.

Let us take notice of the main points of these regulations: to rise at four and retire at eight, with four repasts between; prayer was joined with work. “By this means,” said Saint Vincent, “the poor are brought up in the fear of God, taught to earn their living, assisted in their necessities, and the cities are delivered of the most dangerous sluggards.”

It was not always possible to possess resources to meet such wants, but the saint used a thousand means: here, by permanent subscriptions from the Bishop, canons, or curés, lords and rich people; there, by collections at the church and from house to house; again, by poor-boxes in the hotels; sometimes, by penalties imposed by the judges, and by being relieved from payment of certain taxes. Many of these customs still exist, but who ever thinks that they owe their origin to Saint Vincent de Paul?

The report of these new institutions reached Burgundy, where, after the religious strife, the people were vainly struggling in the midst of increasing pauperism. The cities were overrun. No remedy was found for such an evil, except shelters, where the poor were un-

willing to enter, and where a too feeble police force was unable to retain them. They broke away shouting, and often sword in hand went about terrifying the inhabitants. In the midst of these difficulties it was rumoured that a priest, the Count de Joigny's chaplain, had formed a new institution, already established in many towns, and which met all difficulties. Whether Saint Vincent was specially invited, or whether in going from Paris to Marseilles he stopped of his own accord in one of these towns is not known; the fact is, however, that in 1623 he went and made a somewhat lengthened stay in Burgundy. With this journey is connected the establishment of the association at Bourg, Trévoux, Mâcon, Châlons, and the neighbouring towns. A dark cloud enveloped these foundations, till in 1846 was discovered, in the archives of Mâcon, an extract from the secretary's book for the year 1623, containing the report of an assembly held in that town, on the occasion of a passing visit of Saint Vincent de Paul. This document is too interesting to omit reproducing it here :—

“All classes were represented at this assembly—the lieutenant-general, crown-prosecutor, the aldermen, the judges, curés, deans, and many of the distinguished gentry and merchants. The mayor spoke first. He explained that the object of their meeting was, in obedience to the divine precept, to provide for the poor. This charitable work was to be on new lines, and should do away with beggars at the church doors and houses, where they got assistance too freely, which made even those that were able, unwilling to work. For some time past it was thought to meet this difficulty by a hospital, but the poor disliked going there. Now, there was among them a holy man, the Count de Joigny's chaplain, who, filled with zeal and piety, had

struck on a new plan, by which comfort and nourishment had been given to the poor of Trévoux and other places. He thought, therefore, that this opportunity ought to be utilised in the interests of the community.

"The Lieutenant-General followed, and said that this proposal ought to be received as a pious and praiseworthy scheme, and that if they could establish this association, which seemed easily done, they should avoid the importunities of beggars. If each one contributed something, it would be less burdensome than to give alms at the church or at their houses. The poor ought to be instructed, made to have a loving fear, catechised and brought to the sacraments. To accomplish this it was not necessary to have a separate building, where, moreover, they would not remain ; but merely to select a few capable persons who would collect the contributions and distribute them according to what would be thought best.

"The Dean of Saint Vincent's then rose and said, that considering how much the poor are recommended in the Gospel, it gave him extreme pleasure to see realised what the piety of the late Bishop of Mâçon, Mgr. Gashard Dinet, had desired so much. However difficult it seemed, they ought to believe that God would make all things easy, since it concerned not only the corporal but also the spiritual welfare of the poor, towards which scheme they would willingly contribute, even out of the church revenue.

"M. Chandon, formerly crown-prosecutor, added, there was no one that did not accept and welcome the proposal, and as it was a work of charity and for the service of God, nothing would be impossible.

"The Crown Solicitor said, for his part, the matter was so good and praiseworthy, that there would not



be one who would not be ready and willing to contribute something, seeing the instruction the poor should receive, as well in the service of God as in some trade.

"All spoke in their turn to the same effect, after which, as a beginning of so laudable a charity, it was unanimously resolved, that each branch of the society should name delegates, and thus form a commission to institute ways and means of putting into practice what they had resolved upon. This was done the next day."<sup>1</sup>

Behold ancient France in her unity and grandeur ! the lieutenant-general, crown-prosecutor, curés and deans, aldermen, presidents of the tribunals, king's councillors, the gentry and the bourgeois, all co-operating to advance not only the temporal but the spiritual interests of the poor, and justly deeming that in proportion as the poor become more moral and Christian, society becomes more secure and tranquil.

Saint Vincent does not seem to have been present at this assembly, though it was he who inspired and urged it on. In each speech we may recognise the doctrine he everywhere preached, and now that he was armed with full authority he immediately set to work.

As usual, to establish some order among this confused mass of true and false poverty, the first class really in want of charity, the second only abusing it, he began : (1) by separating the sick from the healthy ; (2) he confided the sick to some pious ladies who would visit and comfort them ; (3) he gave work to the healthy ; (4) he procured trades for the young ; (5) he distributed alms to those unable to work. These were assembled

<sup>1</sup> This precious document was only recently discovered, and published for the first time by M. Henri Batault, in his *Histoire de l'association des dames de la Miséricorde de Châlon-sur-Saône*.

every Sunday at Saint-Nizier, to hear mass and a sermon, after which bread and money were distributed according to each one's necessity and the number of children. Begging was forbidden under penalty of having the aid withdrawn, while at the same time the faithful were earnestly recommended not to give money in the streets, and thus charity was made to suppress mendicity. As to tramps, they were to receive a night's lodging, and to be sent away the next morning with a little alms. Every precaution was taken to prevent idleness among the healthy poor. They were always made to earn their livelihood, and it was only after a severe examination of their work, that they received the additional amount which they could not earn. A supernatural wisdom, which we have already experienced, and of which we have here a new illustration, governed all these regulations.

For the resources and their administration Saint Vincent formed two associations of charity, one of men, the other of women. The bishop, the dean of the chapter, the curé of Saint-Pierre, and the lieutenant-general thought it an honour to join the first, while all the most distinguished ladies joined the second. In less than three weeks the association had worked wonders, and more than three hundred poor had been lodged, fed, and clothed. The funds of the association consisted of a yearly tax on the clergy and rich people, whether in the form of money or goods; of certain fines that were allocated to that object; of certain tolls; and of a collection made every Sunday by the young ladies of Mâcon. Saint Vincent had arranged that all aid was to be sent to the common fund, in order the better to maintain discipline and improve the poor. The moment these arrangements were completed, the saint disappeared. He escaped incognito. This was the best course, for otherwise he

could not have avoided a public ovation. He says this himself in a letter to Mdlle. de Gras: "Each one was bathed in tears, and the aldermen paid me so much honour, that not wishing to have it, I was compelled to leave in secret."

Thus after seventeen years of groping, our saint had found his true vocation. He discovered it himself, and began with two innovations, so original, so full of wisdom and moderation, and at the same time so courageous, that we may judge from these two master-strokes what the great organiser should accomplish when he attempted greater things, and how he should utilise greater resources.

And yet this magnificent work, hardly begun, was on the point of being stopped and nipped in the bud by the jealous susceptibilities of authority. In some legal documents of Beauvais is found a petition against Vincent de Paul, to prevent him continuing his good works. It is so interesting that we must beg leave to insert it fully here.

Draft of the Lieutenant of Beauvais' Appeal, found in the Judicial Registry, protesting against the establishment in that town of an Association of Charity, contemplated by Vincent de Paul.

"Though it has been shown by the Attorney-General, how strictly it is forbidden by royal ordinance and law, for any one to suggest or establish any society or confraternity within the kingdom, without his Majesty's letters-patent, nevertheless, it has happened during the last fifteen days that a certain priest named Vincent has, despite the royal authority, and without communicating with the royal officials or the municipal body, caused to be assembled a large number of women, whom he per-

suaded to join an association, to which he gave the name of Association of Charity. The said association is intended to aid and furnish a livelihood for the poor of this town, and to collect money each week for their benefit. This is to be carried out by the aforesaid association, which about three hundred women have joined, and they meet often to perform their duties, which ought not to be tolerated. Having regard to the legal prohibition, it is now requested that we be fully informed on the matter, in order to lay it before the King's Attorney-General."<sup>1</sup>

The title of this document, "Draft of Appeal," seems to show that it was never presented. The De Gondis, so powerful in Church and State, probably shielded the humble priest, and had the appeal set aside.

<sup>1</sup> Feillet, *Distress at the Time of the Fronde*, p. 212.

## CHAPTER VI

COMMENCEMENT OF THE WORKS AMONG THE GALLEYS—  
SAINT VINCENT IN THE CHAINS OF A GALLEY-SLAVE  
—HE VISITS HIS HOME

1622-1623

WHEN not at Montmirail, Joigny, Folleville, or Villepreux, Saint Vincent lived in Paris. The De Gondis usually spent the winter there, in their beautiful house in the Rue Pavée, near the parish of Saint-Saveur. It was during one of these sojourns in Paris that he came in contact with a more deplorable misery than he had hitherto experienced, of which he had no idea, and which deeply touched his heart, evoking even some of his highest acts of charity.

We have seen that M. de Gondi was Admiral of the Galleys, or, as we say nowadays, in command of the Mediterranean squadron, for the galleys never left the Mediterranean, which was their station. A galley was known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a long low vessel, not very high out of the water, carrying about four hundred men, with five large and a dozen small guns. It was propelled by three hundred rowers, and carried about one hundred and twenty soldiers. These rowers were criminals sentenced to this wretched work, hence the name galley-slave or outcast. They were attached to the seat by chains, and bound in couples. Their shoulders were bare, and a cap covered their head. The chief officer stood at the stern, near the captain, to



receive orders ; while the second and third were respectively in the middle and at the prow, all three brandishing lashes over the bare shoulders of the galley-slaves. When the captain gave the order to start, the chief officer signalled with his whistle, and the second and third began with their whips to strike the bare shoulders of the rowers, just as in our day the driver of a coach urges forward his team. If a rower flagged, the captain shouted—"Double the lashes." Should he fall fainting on his oar (which often happened), then he was lashed till he came to, or till he died. In the latter case he was rudely thrown overboard.

Over and above this frightful treatment, the mere chaining made the life of an outcast a veritable martyrdom. "When the merciless sea of Libya," says a captain of one of them, "overtakes a galley along the Italian coast, when the howling north wind drives it hither and thither, and the Gulf of Lyons exposes it to the moist wind of Syria, everything combines to make the galley-ship a hell. The sad moaning of the men, the fearful cries of the crew, the terrible howls of the slaves, the creaking of the timber mingling with the clanking of the chains and the fury of the tempest, were sufficient to frighten the hardest heart. Rain, hail, lightning, frequently accompanied these violent storms, and the furious billows washing over the ship added a new terror to the situation." In the summer, the sun darting his rays on the bare shoulders of the galley-slaves, the mosquitoes torturing them, and fetid odours from all sides varied their misery without diminishing it. So wretched was the condition of all, that even the officers could find no relief, and knew not where to take shelter.

At that time France had under the command of M. de Gondi a score of galleys, rowed by six thousand

slaves, and manned by two thousand five hundred soldiers.

These galleys, stationed at Toulon, Marseilles, Aigues-Mortes, Narbonne, guarded the Mediterranean, by chasing Turkish corsairs and protecting the coast. But the fortresses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries clearly show they were hardly sufficient. Every year M. de Gondi set sail from Toulon or Marseilles with eight, ten, or twelve well-armed galleys, and scoured the Mediterranean, visiting its ports and most secret creeks, capturing and sinking all pirate vessels. No details remain to us of these expeditions, but various fragments recently discovered prove what courage and activity the Admiral displayed in the years 1620, 1621, 1622. Only to cite the year 1620: we learn that M. de Gondi left Marseilles with seven well-armed galleys. He soon discovered, near Oran, two pirate vessels, "which he fired on so furiously," says the *French Mercury*, "that they were obliged to surrender. Forty Christians were found chained to the seats of these two ships, and there were a hundred and fifty armed Turks, whom they took captives." Some days afterwards they came up with a large vessel that had Soliman Raïs, the famous pirate from Algiers, on board, with forty pieces of cannon, and two hundred soldiers. The Admiral pursued him so keenly for two days, that, no longer able to hold out, and fearing to fall into the hands of the Christians, he saved himself in a canoe, after burning the ammunition and abandoning his vessel. Towards the end of the same year, September 1620, the Admiral returned to Marseilles with his seven galleys intact, leading four Algerian vessels captive, having burned a fifth and sunk a sixth.

Such was the expedition of 1620. That of 1621 was

more brilliant, but even it was surpassed by that of 1622. M. de Gondi got orders from the King to go direct through the Straits of Gibraltar with all his available force, to support the French fleet about to attack La Rochelle. The inhabitants of this port had raised a fleet of fifty-six large ships, with which they were masters of the ocean, and daily made considerable captures. We shall not dwell on this expedition. Let us merely say that M. de Gondi displayed prodigies of skill and valour ; that with light ships he harassed the enemy's heavy ones so much, that in the opinion of Admiral de Guise, he contributed to the success of this war more than anybody else, and earned for himself the reputation of being one of the most intrepid captains.

Under such circumstances, during the long absences of the Admiral amid the dangers to which he was exposed, what were they talking of at home in the Rue Pavée ? Was it not of him, of his glory, of the soldiers that fell by his side, and of the unhappy galley-slaves, who, not to speak of musket-shot, were enduring such dreadful misery ? How deeply stirred must have been the sensitive and tender heart of Mme. de Gondi, and how her feelings were echoed by Saint Vincent de Paul ! Before embarking for Toulon and Marseilles, the galley-slaves made a more or less prolonged sojourn in Paris, where they came under the jurisdiction of M. de Gondi. Saint Vincent asked and obtained permission to be admitted into their dungeons. The seventeenth century had no mercy for criminals. Shut up in dark, damp, and unhealthy prisons, they were bound with iron chains to the wall, and their food was black bread and water. Long might they linger sickly, before any notice was taken of them, and often vermin covered their sores, which exhaled an insupportable stench. The sight

must indeed have been awful, for even Saint Vincent de Paul drew back horror-stricken, and his eyes filled with tears.

He went at once to M. de Gondî, who was then in Paris, and represented in the most touching terms the abandoned state of these unfortunate beings, adding that they were under his charge and that the responsibility before God was upon him.

Philippe-Emmanuel was an upright and good man. He declared his readiness to do everything in his power, but could see no remedy for so incurable an evil. But Saint Vincent had weighed the matter well, and proposed a simple and practical plan, which was at once adopted. The saint was given full power. Going then among the outcasts, he encouraged them by his presence, consoled them by his piety, raised their hearts to God, and taught them to carry their cross in a spirit of atonement. The most repulsive disease, the most contagious sickness, did not affright him. Assisted by two young noble-hearted priests, M. Belin, the Count's chaplain at Villepreux, and M. Portail, the saint's first disciple in the work of the missions, he was charitable even to heroism. So great was the change he wrought among the galley-slaves, hitherto loaded with chains, that they were quietly transported to a large hospital which Saint Vincent had purchased and fitted up in the Rue Saint-Honoré. This institution was supported and visited by Mgr. de Gondî, Archbishop of Paris, the Admiral, his sister-in-law, the Marchioness of Meignelais, and the other distinguished ladies of the capital. Even the King wished to hear about these wonderful deeds of charity from M. de Gondî, and was so amazed at the piety, zeal and heroic devotedness of the saint, that to afford him an opportunity of extending his labours throughout the kingdom, he insti-

tuted in his favour the new office of Chaplain-General of the Galleys of France.

These are the terms of his commission :—

“PARIS, *February* 18, 1619.

“From the evidence of the Count de Joigny, Admiral of the Galleys of France, it has been shown to His Majesty to be necessary for the welfare and solace of the outcasts, who are at present, or shall hereafter be, in the said galleys, to select an ecclesiastic of probity and sufficient learning to be Chaplain-General, and to take precedence of all the other chaplains. His Majesty, sympathising with the outcasts, and desirous that they should draw spiritual profit from their corporal punishment, has, relying on the recommendation of the Count de Joigny, conferred on Vincent de Paul, priest, bachelor of theology, the said office of Chaplain-General of the Galleys of France, with an annuity of 600 livres, and all the rank and privileges enjoyed by the other officers of the fleet in the Levant. It is His Majesty’s wish that the said Vincent de Paul as Chaplain-General should in rank and authority take precedence of all other chaplains, and so be treated on board the galleys, by virtue of the present commission, which His Majesty has deigned to sign with his own hand, and desired me, his Secretary of State, to do likewise.

(Signed) “LOUIS.

“PHILIPPEAUX.”

On February 12, Saint Vincent, on entering his new office, took the oath before the Count de Joigny, His Majesty’s Lieutenant-General in command of the Levant.

Fortified with this commission, which gave him admission and authority in every prison, Saint Vincent determined to visit them all. He commenced with



Marseilles, the largest and worst, where veterans of vice, the most hardened criminals, were to be met with. Here he worked wonders by humility, gentleness and devotedness ; and it was here, it is said, took place one of the most extraordinary events, not only in the life of Saint Vincent, but in the life of any saint.

Touched by the despair of a young outcast rudely torn away from his wife and children, the saint put on his chains and voluntarily took his place. However astounding it may seem, the fact is certain and cannot be doubted. All his biographers assert it, and the Church testifies to it in her solemn inquiry. The saint's humility, however, took such precautions to hide it, that some obscurity remains about the circumstances and the exact time it took place.

Let us see in the first place the testimony admitted by the Church in the process of the saint's canonisation. The résumé of these depositions are found in a special abstract prepared for the Pope by Jean Zuccherini, the sub-promoter of the faith. The witnesses—all persons worthy of credence—spoke, no doubt, from hearsay, for it was impossible to adduce eye-witnesses a hundred years after the event. But the testimony, clear and precise, evidently came from reliable sources, and places the fact beyond all doubt.

However, the best proof—one absolutely unanswerable—is that of Saint Vincent himself. One of his priests asked him, if it were really true that he had at one time taken the place of an outcast, and whether it was in consequence of that, he had the swelling in his legs. What should so profoundly humble a man have done if it were not true ? He would have exclaimed like Saint John, "*Et confessus est, et non negavit, quia non sum Christus.*" Instead of saying

emphatically, "No, it is not true; I never wore the chains of a galley-slave," he merely smiled and changed the conversation. Moreover, Clement XII., in the bull of canonisation, did not hesitate to mention the fact: "It is related that Vincent de Paul, after the example of Saint Raymond Nonnatus, became a slave. Seeing one of his brethren worn out with the heavy weight of his chains, and unable otherwise to relieve the unfortunate creature's agony, to release him from captivity Vincent himself became a slave."

If the fact is incontestable, it is not so with the time at which it occurred. Abelly, who writes only four years after the saint's death, does not connect it with Marseilles, but relates it, without assigning any date, in the chapter on his virtues.<sup>1</sup> Collet, the most exact of his biographers, places it at Marseilles in 1622. He thinks, that to be more at liberty to make investigations, the saint came to Marseilles incognito, which is difficult to suppose.<sup>2</sup> Others, relying on the fact that the saint suffered for forty-five years from a swelling in his legs, date it as far back as 1615. Saint Vincent had been then two years in the family of De Gondi, and not unlikely he had gone to Marseilles with the Admiral of the Galleys, and this extraordinary act of charity could only have taken place after the Admiral had embarked. But there is no trace of this voyage in history. Finally, the bull of canonisation, in saying "that he delivered one of his companions from captivity," would seem to refer the event to the period of his slavery in Barbary. But there he was always a captive, never free, and consequently never in a position to renounce his liberty in favour of another. We must then adopt 1622, the date held by Collet, to which no serious objection can

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. iii. chap. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Collet, vol. ii. p. 101.

be raised, for everything tends to make it most probable—nay, so to speak, certain. As a matter of fact, Louis XIII. left Paris on March 20, 1622, to terminate his brilliant campaign of 1621. He set out from the Nantes side to see in what state was the royal fleet, composed of all the ships from Normandy and Brittany, and with which he intended attacking La Rochelle. Finding the fleet rather weak and badly equipped, he boldly determined on bringing to his aid, through the Straits of Gibraltar, the Mediterranean squadron. This had never been done before, and it was questionable whether those light ships could stand the sea and confront heavy ones. On receiving the King's orders, M. de Gondi immediately set out for Marseilles, to preside over the final preparations and to assume command. He brought with him his eldest son, Pierre, whom he intended to succeed him some day as Admiral of the Galleys, and whom he wished to receive his baptism of fire under his own eyes. Saint Vincent accompanied them, deeming it a convenient occasion to begin his visitation of the galleys as Chaplain-General. After the necessary preparations, M. de Gondi and his son put out to sea, bringing ten galleys manned by twelve hundred soldiers and rowed by three thousand slaves. As many more remained at Marseilles and Toulon, which were to be armed immediately, and held ready to join the others on the first signal. What was there to prevent this extraordinary action of our saint from taking place within the six months that M. de Gondi was passing through the Straits of Gibraltar and fighting before La Rochelle? They were manning the ten galleys that remained in port, and those who have read of the period, know how difficult it was to procure rowers. The sentences not being sufficient,

the numbers were supplied from the ordinary prisons. Long penalties were ordered to be given up, and service on the galleys substituted. Under these circumstances a young man, guilty, no doubt, was brought off, but who at another time should not have been sent to the galleys. Our saint saw him sobbing and crying, because he had to leave his wife and children in misery, and this moved the saint to pity. Did he at once take his chains and fasten them round his feet? This was impossible, and the saint was too adroit and too modest to do so. Abelly says that he was so touched at the miserable state to which the family was reduced, that he determined "to try every means of comforting them." This required time, and was not easy. "Not succeeding," continues Abelly, "he was interiorly urged by an extraordinary movement of charity, to put himself in this poor man's place, and set him free to assist his afflicted family." How did he effect this? We know not. He must have employed the greatest skill that charity could suggest, but in what that consisted we are ignorant. What was there to prevent him, for such an object, to conceal his name, and even remove his soutane? He had been on the ten galleys that were part of M. de Gondî's fleet. But was he also known on the ten that were being manned? Could he not conceal his name and his dignity? No doubt, a surprise from one of the officers was not impossible; but if so, there are some deeds of this kind so noble, that we must forget and forgive them. The very nature of a noble action is to make its witnesses admirers, and, so to speak, co-operators. Now, what more sublime than to see a man delivering himself up for another, to see a priest through charity become a galley-slave and an outcast? Such a sight dazzles us by its brilliancy, and forces us to turn aside in admiration.

His captivity, at any rate, did not last long. The saint was soon recognised, and hastened to leave Marseilles, more ashamed of his virtue than others are of their vice.

At the time that Saint Vincent returned to the family of De Gondi, great trials were filling with mourning that house till then so brilliant and so happy. The first, on August 3, 1622, was the death of Cardinal Henri de Gondi, Bishop of Paris, and Prime Minister under Louis XIII. He had accompanied the King during the entire campaign of 1621 and 1622 as President of the Council, and it was while with him at the siege of Beziers that he was suddenly taken away when hardly fifty. He was a pious and amiable man, in whose life it is difficult not to feel the direct influence of Saint Vincent de Paul. Consecrated Bishop at twenty-four, possessing an immense fortune, made Cardinal and Prime Minister, he used all his wealth and influence in creating and developing a host of religious institutions. How Saint Vincent must have deplored the loss of such a bishop? Fortunately he was worthily replaced by a member of his own family, his brother Jean-François de Gondi, at first a Capuchin, and then Dean of Notre-Dame. This man, of very average ability and rather weak character, redeemed himself before posterity by contributing with all his influence to the work of the missions and the establishment of the two seminaries of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and of Saint-Lazare. We now see the providence of Saint Vincent's visits to the little parishes of Clichy and Châtillon, and his return into the family of De Gondi.

But sad as was the death of the Cardinal, it was nothing to the grief that awaited Mme. de Gondi. She had three sons. The second, Henri, god-son of the late Cardinal, was, like his mother, of fascinating beauty. Out hunting while only eight years old, his horse



stumbled and threw him. Trying to disengage his foot, the horse kicked him on the head, and he was brought home dead to his mother. Saint Vincent was with her at the time, and we must always regret that no detailed account of the grief of such a mother, or of the consolation given by such a priest, has come down to us. She wept for this child till her death, which undoubtedly was hastened by the event.

Mme. de Gondi was mourning her second son scarcely a month, when another bitter trial filled her cup of sorrow to overflowing. Her eldest son, Pierre, who had accompanied the Admiral in the expedition against La Rochelle, having exhibited the ardour of his race and age, and having had his horse shot under him in the island of Ré, was grievously wounded. A musket shot had lodged in his shoulder and broken it. No doubt the joy of duty well done, the name of De Gondi carried so high, a mother's pride in seeing her son a hero, all this somewhat tempered Mme. de Gondi's grief. But in what state was her eldest son to be brought home? After following her second to the grave, had she yet to mourn her first? And even if he recovered from his wound, was he to be a cripple for life? For days Mme. de Gondi endured unutterable anguish, to which she might have succumbed had not Saint Vincent been present to raise and sustain her courage. At last the Admiral arrived with his fond care, pale and feeble, yet fully convalescent and no longer in danger of life or limb.

It was after these events, in the winter of 1622-1623, that the Admiral and his wife, so pious and full of faith, took a resolution which had a woful consequence on the Church. How was it that Saint Vincent, with all his influence and holiness, did not prevent this calamity?

Their second son, Henri, who was killed, had been destined for the Church. He had already looked forward to the purple, and his family had still more eagerly coveted that dignity for him. Now that he was dead, they thought of his young brother, Francis, who had been intended for the army. There was no one less fitted for the priesthood. But were they to relinquish the Archbishopric of Paris, the Cardinalate, that premier position in the Church held by a member of their family for eighty years? Let us not blame too severely the Admiral and his pious wife—the one, who was to die in so saintly a manner, and the other, who, after his wife's death, was to abandon vast wealth and the highest titles to become a simple Oratorian, hidden in an humble cell. Let us rather impeach their generation, and recall the deeply felt and just testimony of their son, Cardinal de Retz.<sup>1</sup>

When the De Gondis had passed through the sorrows which we have been describing, Saint Vincent returned to a design which he had been contemplating for a whole year, namely, to give a general mission among the galleys under the Count de Joigny. These galleys, which were usually in the Mediterranean, according to arrangements at the Admiralty, had left it, on account of the exceptional circumstances before alluded to, and had contributed not a little to annihilate the insurgent fleet. Now that peace had been concluded, victory assured, and that the galleys were about to put into winter quarters, it seemed just the moment to give those unfortunate beings a mission, which should win for them peace in heaven, as their courage had done on earth. Saint Vincent applied to Cardinal Sourdis, Archbishop of Bordeaux, a pious and zealous man, forming his life on

<sup>1</sup> See p. 47.

that of Saint Charles. Our saint secured twenty religious, and placed them in couples on each galley. Directing the mission himself, he went from galley to galley, moving those unhappy creatures by his preaching, at once so simple, so humble and so mild, that he gained an extraordinary success. A Turk, who had resisted everybody else, yielded to his preaching, and continued till death one of his most faithful and devoted followers.

This mission lasted nearly a month, and made a great stir. It brought to Bordeaux some of the saint's friends, who begged of him not to return to Paris without visiting his family. He was only a few leagues from them. It was twenty-two years since he saw his mother, and he had never met his nephews. When should so grand an opportunity turn up again? The saint allowed himself to be persuaded, and started for Pouy. It was there he had been baptized, received his first communion, and under the great oaks by the lake had passed his pious childhood. The aged priest who had blessed his entrance into the world, reposed under the shadow of the cross in the cemetery, but his place was now filled by the good Père Dussin, a relative of Saint Vincent's. It was with this priest that the saint lodged. His first act before saying mass in the church in which he had been made a Christian, was to renew his baptismal vows, and publicly humble himself for having kept them so badly. The good curé, to honour his guest, used to invite to dinner every day some of the saint's friends and the neighbouring curés. It was noticed that Saint Vincent never drank his wine without largely diluting it with water, and at night, like the Curé of Ars, he so altered his bed that he practically slept on the floor. When our saint was a child, the chapel of Notre-Dame de Buglose was only a ruin, and its statue concealed in the lake. Three

years before Père Dussin had restored the statue, rebuilt the chapel, and re-established the pilgrimage. Saint Vincent resolved that it should be in this venerable sanctuary that he would assemble his friends and bid them adieu. A solemn pilgrimage was instituted, and the saint walked bare-footed, accompanied by his relatives and a large number of the townspeople. There he celebrated mass with extraordinary recollection, and addressed a few words to those present. After mass all his friends met round a modest repast at which the saint presided, and when it was over he rose to take leave of them. Instinctively they fell on their knees and asked his blessing. "Oh yes," he touchingly said, "I bless you, but I bless you poor and humble, and I ask for you from our Divine Lord the blessing of holy poverty. Never seek to leave the condition in which He placed you. This is my earnest recommendation, which I implore of you to transmit as an inheritance to your children. Adieu for ever." And saying these words he departed.

Up to this Saint Vincent had fairly well restrained his tears, but now that he was alone on the road they flowed freely. Standing and looking back to wish a last farewell to his humble village, his heart failed him. He thought of the relatives he was leaving in poverty, whom a word from him might comfort, and this gave him a feeling of remorse. This is how he spoke of his visit: "Having spent eight or ten days with my relatives, to instruct them in the ways of salvation, and detach them from the desire of possessing riches, I went so far as to tell them that they had nothing to expect from me, and that if I had chests of gold and silver I should not give them anything, because an ecclesiastic who possesses anything owes it to God and the poor. On the day of

my departure I felt so much grief at leaving my poor relatives that I did nothing but weep all along the road." Thus bathed in tears the saint wavered in his resolution. Instead of leaving them in poverty, it would be so easy to assist them ! Why not do so ? "To these tears," he continues, "succeeded the thought of giving them assistance and putting them in a better condition, of giving this to one and that to another ; my softened heart portioned out to them in this manner what I possessed and what I did not possess. I say it to my shame, and I say it because it may be that God permitted this to make me more sensibly perceive the importance of the evangelical maxim of which we are speaking. I was three months under subjection to this troublesome passion, of advancing the fortune of my brothers and sisters : it was the constant burden of my poor mind. However, when I found myself somewhat free, I prayed to God to deliver me from this temptation, and I besought Him so earnestly that He had pity on me and delivered me from these inordinate affections for my relatives ; and though they have been depending on alms, and are so still, God has given me the grace to leave them to His providence, and to consider them more happy than if they had been in easy circumstances." <sup>1</sup>

Here is illustrated in all its grandeur the exalted virtue of priests, which requires them to be, like Melchisedech, in absolute detachment, without father, mother, sister, or brother. Saint Vincent could never have reformed the clergy if he had not given them the example, and he spared no pains to show forth such acts of detachment, that they might be the better seen and appreciated. This was his conduct all through life. As he was one day sitting in his room, the brother

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul.*



announced that a peasant, rather poorly clad and calling himself his nephew, wished to see him. At first the saint blushed, and asked one of his confrères to go. But in a moment he blushed for having blushed. Hastening to the door where his nephew stood, he tenderly embraced him, and taking him by the arm, brought him in. Then assembling the community, he presented the peasant, who was rather embarrassed, saying: "Gentlemen, this is one of the best specimens of my family," and turning to his nephew, he bade him salute the priests. During the day he treated him as a distinguished guest, according to the custom, and introduced him to all the grand visitors. But remorse for yielding to false shame remained in his heart, and he felt constrained to unburden himself at the next retreat. "Gentlemen, and my brothers," he said, "pray for this proud man, who wished to conceal his nephew in his room, because he was only a peasant and badly clad." As to his nephew, he was obliged to return as he came, on foot, and with ten crowns in his pocket. Saint Vincent had received this modest sum from the Marchioness de Meignelais, the only assistance he ever asked for his family.<sup>1</sup>

He treated similarly his other relatives, and discouraged their coming to Paris. "Do you think," said he one day, "that I do not love my relatives? Oh! certainly I love them; but we must listen to grace, and not to nature. We must rank first the most abandoned poor." On another occasion when he was spoken to about some of his relatives reduced to poverty by the war; "Behold," said he, "the state of my poor relations, in misery, absolute misery. I myself, had not God favoured me with a vocation, should be in poverty too.

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. i. p. 16.

But what can be done? The goods of the community do not belong to me, and it would be bad example to dispose of them." Here was a man, for half a century honoured with the confidence of the King, of the Queen, of the princes of the Church, and of the highest nobility, with immense sums of money passing through his hands, distributing millions to support whole provinces, and yet he never devoted a crown to his poor relations, though only cultivating the land, and often reduced in bad times to the direst distress. When one is detached to this degree, one has then a right to speak boldly, and say to priests, "Detach yourselves from everything."

## CHAPTER VII

FOUNDATION OF THE WORKS OF THE MISSION—DEATH OF THE  
COUNTESS DE GONDI—HER HUSBAND ENTERS THE ORATORY  
—SAINT VINCENT RETIRES TO THE COLLÈGE DES BONS-  
ENFANTS—AFTER FIFTY YEARS' PREPARATION HE UNDER-  
TAKES HIS GREAT WORKS

1624-1625

IT was after this visit, after the mission among the galleys, after his efforts to evangelise the poor people of Châtillon-les-Dombes, of Folleville, Montmirail, of Trévoux, and of Maçon, that the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission was founded. We presume to say that this company of priests, spread now over the entire world, devoted exclusively to the evangelisation of the poor country-people, was founded not by a priest, not by Saint Vincent de Paul, as is commonly thought. It was founded by a woman, and Saint Vincent would not contradict me. Not only was it not founded by him, but every artifice had to be used to induce him to place himself at its head. It was the angelic Mme. de Gondi who founded the Congregation of the Mission.

She had the heart of a priest and of an apostle. The thought that on her vast estates there were seven or eight thousand souls, ignorant, worldly, and forgetful of their salvation, tormented her day and night. What could be done to convert them and raise their minds to God? She thought of missions in each village which might be renewed every five years, and had already

reserved for that end 16,000 livres. But where were the priests to be found who would accept so humble an employment? At first she applied to the Jesuits, but was refused. Next she turned to the Oratorians, but they were only newly founded and destined for seminaries. She tried many other communities, but always unsuccessfully. Suddenly, amid so many fruitless endeavours, an idea struck her. Why go so far away? Had she not at her very hand all she could desire? Had not Saint Vincent laboured most successfully at Folleville, Villepreux, and Montmirail? Had he not attracted holy priests, even doctors of the Sorbonne, who were anxious to relinquish the easy life of so many of their brethren, and to labour on missions for the salvation of souls? This, however, was transitory; was there no way of making it permanent? No doubt it was necessary to get priests of exceptional detachment, who would renounce preaching in cities; for after fashionable and learned audiences it would be difficult for them to accustom themselves to dull and heavy country-people. They should be priests, too, who would renounce all human ambition; for otherwise how could they devote themselves to the poor? The poor could be of no service to anybody, and very often when persons worked among them, the workers were regarded as incapable of anything else. But let it not be thought that mediocre men suffice among this class. For them distinguished men are sometimes more necessary than for the rich. The broad mind of Mme. de Gondi weighed all this, and she should have despaired, had she not relied on Saint Vincent, more humble than any one, more detached, more zealous, and so gifted in communicating to others the sacred fire that consumed himself.

Full of this idea, she spoke of it to M. de Gondi.

Philippe-Emmanuel had not yet reached that degree of virtue to which we shall afterwards see him rise, nevertheless, like many good men in the world, charitable undertakings deeply appealed to him. He not only approved of his pious wife's design, but desired to co-operate. Her 16,000 livres he brought up to 45,000, and with this a beginning could be made, if only a free house could be obtained. Mme. de Gondi went to her brother-in-law the Archbishop of Paris, and asked if among the establishments at his disposal there was any that might serve as a nucleus of the new Congregation.

Most opportunely there was an old college near the gate Saint-Victor, known as the Collège des Bons-Enfants, the rector of which was about to resign. This was at the disposal of the Archbishop. What better use could be made of it than to hand it over to Saint Vincent! It would be the cradle of a Congregation that would benefit the whole diocese.

Thus everything came to the aid of the new Congregation. The house was now given and the funds assured; the body was ready, and it only remained to breathe into it a soul. That soul was Saint Vincent, but who could induce him to accept such a charge? The three founders, M. and Mme. de Gondi, and the Archbishop of Paris, went together to him, in order the more effectually to overcome his humility. But they disquieted themselves needlessly. The saint's humility was indeed profound, but here his charity prevailed. He was to have an opportunity of entirely devoting himself to his beloved poor, and nothing would be able to prevent him from doing that. He was to have power to collect around him holy priests exclusively occupied with the new work, and he desired nothing better. Like Saint John when he met our Lord, so now Saint Vincent



exclaimed : "*In hoc ergo gaudium meum impletum est.*" He felt such ardour in realising the project that he was continually thinking of it, and so overjoyed was he that he feared he offended God. He went even to make a retreat at Soissons, that God might moderate his enthusiasm and the too sensible joy he felt in consecrating himself to the service of the poor. While on retreat he resolved to undertake nothing "as long as he was carried away with these ardent hopes and great plans." Here we see the eminence of his virtue. To fear seeking self in doing good ; to shun gratifying self even in tending the wretched and miserable, in healing their wounds and ulcers—such sentiments God alone can inspire, and He alone can reward.

The deed of foundation bears date April 17, 1625. It was drawn up in the name of M. and Mme. de Gondi, in their house in the Rue Pavée. Saint Vincent hardly seems to have been present, but we perceive him dictating from a distance, and the deed of foundation only expresses the views he had slowly and deeply matured.

The deed at once points out the object of the work. "God having inspired M. and Mme. de Gondi for some years past with the desire of doing Him honour, as well on their own estates as elsewhere, they have considered that, since it has pleased His Divine Majesty to provide in His infinite mercy for the spiritual necessities of cities by the number of holy doctors and virtuous religious who preach and catechise therein, and who preserve in them a spirit of devotion, there remains only the poor country-people to be cared for. They think that this can be remedied by a pious association of certain ecclesiastics of known orthodoxy, piety, and fitness, who are willing to renounce preferment in cities, as well as all appointments and dignities

in the Church, to apply themselves, under the bishops, simply and entirely to the salvation of these poor people ; to pass from village to village at the expense of their common purse ; to preach, instruct, exhort, and catechise the poor, and to bring them to a general confession, without taking from them any payment or offering whatever, to the end that they may distribute without charge the gifts they have gratuitously received from the hand of God. To make provision for this end, the said Count and Countess, in thanksgiving for the benefits and graces which they have received, and still daily receive, from the same Divine Majesty ; to assist in the salvation of poor souls, which God so ardently desires ; to honour the mysteries of the Incarnation, Life, and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ ; out of love for His Most Holy Mother ; and moreover, to strive to obtain grace to live well the rest of their days, that they together with their family may attain eternal glory—to this end the said Count and Countess have given as alms the sum of 45,000 livres, which they have delivered into the hands of M. Vincent, priest of the diocese of Acqs and licentiate in canon law.”

The conditions beautifully show forth the admirably practical mind of Saint Vincent de Paul. They are :—

“1. The said Count and Countess have given, and do give, to the said M. Vincent the power of electing and choosing within a year six ecclesiastics, or such a number as the revenue of the present endowment can support, whose orthodoxy, piety, good morals, and integrity of life are known to him, to labour in the said work under his direction as long as he may live ; and this is the express will and intention of the said Count and Countess, both on account of the confidence which they have in his management, and from the

experience they have had of the good effected by the said missions, in which God gave him an especial blessing. But notwithstanding this direction, the said Count and Countess intend that the said M. Vincent shall make his continual and actual residence in their house, that he may continue to give them and their family the spiritual assistance which he has rendered them for so many years.

“2. The said forty-five thousand livres shall be so invested as to support the missionaries, and be held as their own; and to perpetuate this work for the glory of God and the edification of the neighbour, on the death of the said M. Vincent, those who shall have been admitted, shall elect by vote his successor, whom they shall regard as Superior.

“3. The said Count and Countess shall remain joint founders of this work, and, with their heirs and successors of the same family, shall for ever enjoy the rights and privileges which are conceded and granted to patrons by the holy canons, except the right of nomination, which they have renounced.

“4. The said ecclesiastics shall devote themselves entirely to the care of the said poor country-people; and to this end they shall bind themselves neither to preach nor administer any sacrament in cities which are the seats of bishops, archbishops, or courts of justice, except in case of extreme necessity; they shall also expressly forego all charges, benefices, and dignities. . . .

“5. That the said ecclesiastics shall live in community, under obedience to the said M. Vincent, and to their future Superiors after his death, under the name of the Company or Congregation of Priests of the Mission. Those who shall thereafter be admitted, shall be bound to go every five years through all the

estates of the said Count and Countess, to preach, to hear confessions, to catechise, and to do all the good works aforesaid, and to employ the remainder of their time as they think best for the glory of God and the salvation of the neighbour, and to assist spiritually the poor outcasts, that they may turn to profit their bodily pains. Thus shall the said Count, as Admiral of the Galleys, satisfy the obligation by which he feels himself bound; and this charity he intends to be perpetuated towards the convicts by the said ecclesiastics, for good and just considerations.

“6. That the said missions shall commence in October and be continued till June, when, having laboured for the nine months, the missionaries shall return home and employ their time in recollection and preparation for approaching missions, and in assisting the clergy. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Such is the celebrated deed that emanated from the devotion and exalted faith of a Christian family, a deed that has given to the Church a new army of apostles, and which, for more than thirty years, served as its only rule, and is embodied in the rule still. When, towards the end of his life, Saint Vincent, after long years of meditation, experience, and prayer, determined to draw up the constitutions of the Congregation, he adopted all the principal points of this deed, and only added details.

While Mme. de Gondi was thus employed in beginning the work of the missions, she was also completing another work, to which for a long time she had devoted herself, namely, the conversion of her husband. It may be a surprise to use the word conversion, after all that has been said of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi.

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. i. p. 344.

It is not, indeed, that his faith or morals were ever shipwrecked. He worshipped the holy spouse that God had given him, and even amid the perils of war and of the court he ever remained most affectionately devoted to her. But he was the possessor of an immense fortune, bore a great name, and like all his family, full of ambition, was immersed in all the intrigues and pleasures of the court. It was from this that Mme. de Gondi wished to withdraw him, and to induce him to devote himself more seriously to heavenly things. With this object in view she was not satisfied with having brought to her house and retained with difficulty such a priest as Saint Vincent. Sweetly and prudently she introduced others to her husband. She brought about an interview with M. de Bérulle without her husband suspecting it, and likewise with her great friend the Carmelite, Mother Margaret of the Blessed Sacrament, the second daughter of Mme. Acarie. The latter had not yet left the world, but before entering the Carmelites as an humble lay-sister, was preceded there by her three daughters. The eldest was prioress at Orleans, the second in Paris, and the third at Chartres. The three were endowed with extraordinary gifts, but the second surpassed all, even her mother. "Mme. Acarie," said the Marchioness of Meignelais, "was a saintly soul, but her daughter, Mother Margaret, was even more so." Père Binet was of the same opinion. She worked miracles and had the gift of prophecy. The most distinguished persons came to her—M. de Bérulle, her director ; Anne of Austria, who sought her counsel ; and Saint Chantal, the moment of whose death she had predicted. To this holy soul Mme. de Gondi from time to time brought her husband, that his heart might be moved by such sanctity. In the beginning M. de Gondi's visits were short. He



went merely to please his wife, and his sister, the Marchioness of Meignelais. By degrees, however, he began to like going, and this austere nun who shunned the parlour, while presuming to tell even Anne of Austria not to come too often, distracting the sisters by her pomp, always welcomed M. de Gondi. One day he met there M. de Bérulle. "See," said the holy nun, "M. de Bérulle, whom you do not know now, but a day shall come when you will know him. He will be the most efficacious instrument in the hands of God for your salvation. You laugh at me now, but one day you will see that I was right."—"I have often heard that incident about my father," said Cardinal de Retz, "since he joined the Oratory; but I have heard it even when a child, long before he thought of entering."

Another time this holy nun having spoken to M. de Gondi of the necessity of leading a Christian life in the world, the Admiral replied as all of his rank and occupation usually do, by dwelling on the difficulties of living as a Christian amid so many temptations. The good nun only urged him all the more to break the bonds which he felt so dangerous; but not prevailing on him, she said: "You shall not have your own way, God will obtain the mastery; what you will not voluntarily do to please Him, He will effect as your Sovereign. He will not constrain you, but will sweetly attract you by His mercy, so that you will yield to His inspirations. He will take your good wife out of life at such a time, and after her death will bring you into the Oratory, where you will receive holy orders and be ordained priest. Reflect on this seriously." "M. de Gondi's state of mind at the time," continues Cardinal de Retz, "made him look upon all this as visionary, and regard what was said as altogether outside of the range of probability. He

simply laughed and thought no more of it, and some months afterwards started in his official capacity for Marseilles."

But he carried with him what was to conquer and induce him to lead a life wholly Christian. At sea commanding the galleys, he kept up a correspondence with Mother Margaret, in which she constantly reminded him to think of the salvation of his soul. He had such a veneration for her, that in a storm he invoked her as a saint, and having been saved, he everywhere proclaimed that it was owing to her prayers.

One would think that Mme. de Gondi was awaiting two great events before her departure from this world—the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, and the conversion of her husband. In truth she never belonged to the world. Her delicate body hardly sustained her, and her ardent soul completely carried her away. She well knew that continually visiting the sick and watching by their beds had wasted her strength, but yet she would not diminish her labours. To ease her body would only have been to mortify her soul, and so she continued visiting, though becoming every day more weak. At last she was compelled to give up, for her strength completely gave way, and what is now known as anæmia was bringing her slowly but surely to the grave. She recognised this, but did not complain. Her soul was already in heaven. We have no details of her last moments; all we know is that the great wish of her life was granted—she had Saint Vincent by her death-bed. Sustained and encouraged by his prayers, reassured by his words, full of faith and confidence in God, she breathed her last on June 23, 1625. A great soul, delicate and pure, but scrupulous and timid, she was worthy to receive the blessing of being supported

and encouraged in her last hours by so great a saint. By her will she was to be interred beside her intimate friend, Mother Margaret, in the Carmelite Church in the Rue Chappon. Saint Vincent accompanied the remains there himself, attended all the ceremonies, sang the requiem mass, recited the last prayers, and only retired after having deposited his sacred trust beside her friend Mother Margaret.

We must ever regret that so little is known of so pure a life, the perfect model of a lady of the world. But Abelly has discovered the reason. "The history of so holy a life might have filled a large volume, to the great edification of posterity, but Saint Vincent alone could supply its best pages, having known better than anybody else Mme. de Gondi's eminent qualities and singular virtue. His humility, however, always made him hide the good in which he had co-operated. This was the reason he invariably evaded speaking of Mme. de Gondi, to conceal his own co-operation; for that holy soul did hardly anything of importance for the honour and glory of God, in which Saint Vincent had not taken part, and thus merited a share in her praise. This it was he feared most, and avoided as much as possible."<sup>1</sup>

M. de Gondi did not assist at this sad ceremony. Death had been so sudden, that there was no time to inform him, and he had no idea of its approach. Saint Vincent thought it his duty—and even if it were not, his heart, his deep and holy affection for the Admiral would have urged him—to convey the sad intelligence in person. Moreover, it may have been the dying wish of Mme. de Gondi. In those days it was a long journey from Paris to Marseilles. The saint set out with a heavy heart, thinking, as he went along, how he was to break

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. i. p. 71.

the news of so insupportable a trial to M. de Gondi. I have already said, but must repeat, that to the affection the Admiral bore his amiable and charming wife, was added another feeling which exalted his love to very reverence. The thought of being for ever separated from her had never entered his mind. Saint Vincent knew it was so, and that rendered his present mission all the more trying. After long prayer he appeared before M. de Gondi. The unexpected arrival of the holy priest was a shock in itself. "Well," said Saint Vincent, to break the anxious silence, "are we not ready to do the holy will of God?" Then, gently, with infinite delicacy, he told of Mme. de Gondi's sickness, last moments and death, so precious, so Christian and resigned. He did all this in such a manner that to listen was to be consoled. Nevertheless, the wound was fatal, and in being separated from his holy spouse, M. de Gondi felt he was separated from everything.

The saint had brought with him the last will and testament of the deceased, and handed it over to the Admiral. One of the clauses ran thus: "I beg of M. Vincent, for the love of our Lord, and His Blessed Mother, never to leave the Admiral's house, nor on his death to depart from my children. I likewise ask my husband to retain him for himself and the children, urging them to remember and follow his holy instructions, knowing well, if they do, the advantage it will be to their souls, and the blessings it will bring on themselves and the whole family." This clause was too dear to the heart of M. de Gondi not to insist, with all his strength, to secure so great a benefit. But Saint Vincent felt his hour had come, that Mme. de Gondi's death had released him from his pledge. It was now time to regain his liberty and be free to devote himself to the

great works with which God was inspiring him. He respectfully represented this to the Admiral, who yielded to the saint's arguments.

Philippe-Emmanuel, moreover, was not to remain long in the world. The love he had for his holy spouse was such as could not be compensated on earth. Jesus Christ alone could replace her. He resigned, therefore, his office of Admiral of the Galleys in favour of his eldest son ; and placed his second, the future Cardinal de Retz, with the Jesuits, to complete his education. Thus free, and remembering Mother Margaret's predictions, he went to M. de Bérulle to be received into the Oratory. After a long and serious trial at the hands of the prudent superior, which was accepted with humility by the courageous novice, he received tonsure and the habit. Later on he was ordained priest, celebrated his first mass before a large concourse of people, and then retired to hide himself in a solitude so profound that nothing could tear him from it, not even the prospect of being made a cardinal or the successor of M. de Bérulle as Superior-General of the Oratory. He completely disappeared, and we can hardly penetrate the obscurity in which he desired to be forgotten, living in humility, devoted to the hidden life, wearing a hair shirt, often fasting on bread and water, and exciting the admiration of Saint Vincent, to whom he remained tenderly attached till death.

While M. de Gondi was abandoning the world for the Oratory, Saint Vincent was retiring to the Collège des Bons-Enfants, with M. Portail, his first and faithful disciple, and some other holy priests, to prepare for his great works. He was now fifty. How admirable are the ways of God ! When He wishes to make a doctor, He leads him to a university, and at the feet of some famous master, rears for the world a Saint Bonaventure



or a Saint Thomas. Is it a servant of the poor He wishes to raise up, then He adopts another course: He causes him to be born in poverty, to tend flocks in his childhood, and to grow amid privation and sacrifice. Such was to be the first school of Saint Vincent de Paul, and his second, his captivity in Tunis. After having eaten the bread of the poor, he was to carry the chains of the slave. Thrice sold like a beast in a public market-place, he remained for three entire years in this rough school, and learned on the burning sands of Africa, and in the hard labours of captivity, what were the sorrows and humiliations of certain classes of society.

Yet this was not enough. He had eaten the bread of the poor, but in the honest poverty of his father's home. He had carried the captive's chains, but of an unhappy captive in the prison of Tunis. He had yet to lift the chains of an outcast. Hitherto he had known only the sorrows of poverty; he had yet to learn its shame, that he might feel all its sting. But how was he to descend into the prison of the galley-ship, those abominable, infectious dens, full of blasphemy and sin? Was it to be as a priest, as a benefactor, to console those unfortunate wretches? No, for then he should be too much above them and not sufficiently of themselves. He will descend as an outcast with a weight round his ankle, an oar in his hands, and clad in the ignominious garb of a galley-slave. Such is the will of God. It is necessary, that this great saint may know poverty from all its aspects and be able to say with our Lord: "We have not a high priest, who cannot have compassion on our infirmities; but one tempted in all things like as we are, yet without sin." *Tentatum autem per omnia.*

At the same time that God was leading Saint Vincent through these depths of poverty, as a great master after teaching the lower grades then turns to higher things, in like manner God was guiding our saint into the castles of the nobility, the rich salons of the gentry, and to the very palaces of kings, so that when he commenced his great works he had not only gold and silver, riches and sympathy, but pious and illustrious co-operators in all grades of society.

Around him were gathered the noble and saintly Mme. de Gondî, the Marchioness of Meignelais, Mme. Acarie, and Mme. de Bérulle, who aided his first efforts. There, too, were the Duchess d'Aiguillon, Mme. Goussault, Mme. Herse, Mme. Lamoignon, Mme. Miramion, even nobler by their magnanimity than by their blood. Likewise, by his side he had Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondî, President Molé, Baron de Renty, Commander Sillery, and by no means to be forgotten that zealous group of the first Priests of the Mission, as well as the angelic Sisters of Charity, with Mdle. le Gras at their head. Finally, there were all those who, by supporting his last efforts, had enabled him to complete his great work for the glory of the Church, and the salvation of society through the virtue of charity.



BOOK II

SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL UNDERTAKES  
THE REFORM OF THE CLERGY





## BOOK II

### SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL UNDERTAKES THE REFORM OF THE CLERGY

#### CHAPTER I

SAINT VINCENT IS ESTABLISHED IN THE COLLÈGE DES  
BONS-ENFANTS—SAINT-LAZARE—BEGINNING OF THE  
CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION

1625—1628

As we pass down the Rue Saint-Victor in Paris, at No. 36, we see an old house with a number of little windows. The street ends abruptly and shuts out of sight the old gate that was there ten years ago. To this house Saint Vincent came in 1625. He had only M. Portail with him, his first and dearest disciple, who, born in Beaucaire in 1590, fourteen years after Saint Vincent, came to Paris in 1610, at the age of twenty, in order to prosecute his studies at the celebrated university. On his arrival he providentially met our saint, and immediately placed himself under his direction. Endowed with great innocence, thirsting for humility and poverty, he felt his soul expand under the influence of the servant of God, and resolved never to leave him. On his side our saint became attached to the young ecclesiastic, and though as yet ignorant of what use he should make of him later on, already treated him as a friend in whom he could place the greatest confidence. During his visit to Marseilles in 1622, to Bordeaux and Mâçon in 1623, he confided to

M. Portail the care of "his dear galley-slaves" in Paris, and when in the beginning of the latter year he was given the Collège des Bons-Enfants, not being able to go there himself, he sent him to keep house. The saint only joined him in 1625, and henceforth for thirty-five years they were not to be separated. The one was the head, the other the hand; the one creating the works, the other directing them. M. Portail was as humble a disciple as Saint Vincent was a master, and both were burning with the most holy zeal for the glory of God and the relief of the poor.

Saint Vincent had scarcely settled down in the Collège des Bons-Enfants when he wished to begin the missions. Being only two, they engaged a good priest, M. Gambart, and paid him thirty crowns a year for his services. Nothing is more touching than their first missions. They were accustomed to go and receive the Archbishop's blessing; then after putting everything in order in the old Collège des Bons-Enfants, they carefully closed the doors, and not being able to keep a servant, left the key with a neighbour. They set off, each carrying his knapsack on his shoulder. The poorest villages were preferred, and often they slept on straw. God blessed such poverty. "We used to go," said the saint, "cheerfully and simply, sent by the bishops to evangelise the poor, just as our Lord did. I had only one sermon—on the fear of God—but I turned it in a thousand ways. Such was our condition, when some ecclesiastics, witnessing the blessings God bestowed on our labours, asked and obtained permission to join us. O Saviour! who ever thought that we should become what we are now? If anybody said so then, I should have thought he was ridiculing me. Nevertheless, it was thus God wished to lay the foundation of the little Company. Well, then,

do you call that human of which no man had ever thought? Neither I nor poor M. Portail ever thought of such a thing; alas! we were far from it.”<sup>1</sup>

So great were the consolations which God bestowed on the first missions, that the saint could not tear himself away from them. Only when worn out with fatigue he returned to Paris for a little rest. “It seemed,” said he, “as though the gates of the city ought to fall upon and crush me; and seldom did I return from the mission without this thought coming into my mind. The reason of this was that I seemed to hear within me some one saying: ‘You are going back, while there are other villages expecting the same assistance which you have just rendered to this or to that. If you had not gone thither, it is probable that such and such persons should have died in the state in which you found them, and have been lost and damned. If you have found such and such sins in this parish, do you not think that similar abominations are committed in the neighbouring one, where the poor people expect a mission? And you are going back, you are leaving them! If they die in the meanwhile, and die in their sins, you will be in some measure the cause of their ruin, and you ought to fear lest God should punish you.’”<sup>2</sup>

Full of these thoughts he multiplied prayers to make up for the missions when temporarily interrupted. He used to go with his disciples to celebrated sanctuaries, to implore the spirit of humility and poverty. “The Congregation, still in its infancy, being composed of only three or four, went to Montmartre (with the exception of the miserable man now speaking, he being indisposed) and recommended itself to God through the intercession of the holy martyrs, that it might enter into the practice

<sup>1</sup> “Conferences,” p. 287.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 259.

of poverty, then and since so well observed by a great portion of the community. O Saviour of my soul ! give us grace only to wish for and possess you alone.”<sup>1</sup>

At the end of a year two more joined them. M. François du Coudray, born at Amiens, a doctor of the Sorbonne, a Hebrew scholar, and familiar with many languages, was attracted by the poverty and humility of the saint ; and M. Jean de la Salle, likewise from Picardy, a man of extraordinary prudence and incomparable detachment. The following year, 1627, four others came : M. Jean Beçu, of the diocese of Amiens, aged thirty-four ; M. Lucas, of the diocese of Paris, who was not yet a priest ; M. Brunet, from Riom, in Auvergne, noble-minded, but delicate ; and M. Horgny, from Noyon, the youngest of all, and who was destined to survive the saint, and to administer to him the last sacraments. Seven in all : it was a poor beginning, and looked like a failure. How often his disciples were discouraged ! Vincent, on the contrary, rejoiced. He wrote to M. Portail, October 16, 1635, on the arrival of the last six, who after ten years had brought the number of his disciples up to thirty-three : “The number who have joined since your departure is six. O sir, how I fear the increase and spread of the little Company, and how much reason we have to praise God for honouring the fewness of the disciples of His Son !”

At the head of this little band Saint Vincent continued to extend his missions. Unfortunately we have few details. The saint’s letters, which should have thrown light on this period, are all lost. We know, however, that he and his disciples went as far on one side as Chelles, Verneuil, Croissy, Maubuisson, Passy,

<sup>1</sup> “Conferences,” p. 572.

and Beauvais, and on the other as far as Mesnil, Villeneuve - Saint - George, and Lyons, and perhaps Châtillon-les-Dombes. In 1627, two years only after beginning, they had given missions throughout four southern provinces. "I am returning," wrote a well-known abbé, "from an extended tour in four provinces. I have already told you of the good effected everywhere by your holy Congregation, working for the instruction and edification of the poor country-people. In truth, I do not believe there is anything in God's Church more edifying, and more worthy of those who bear the character of Jesus Christ. We should beseech God in prayer to render permanent an undertaking so advantageous to souls, for whose welfare few of those consecrated to God work as they ought."<sup>1</sup>

The winter was especially the time for missions, for the cold interrupted labour and afforded the poor country-people some spare time. During the summer it was the harvest and vintage time, and then the missionaries studied theology and prepared their sermons. In 1628 Saint Vincent wrote from Beauvais :—

"How is the Congregation going on? Is each one well disposed and contented? Are they observing the few rules, studying and discussing questions among themselves? Is there regular observance? I beg of you, sir, to see that all this be carefully attended to, and that they endeavour to thoroughly understand the *Small Becanus*.<sup>2</sup> We cannot exaggerate the utility of that little book. It has pleased God to make use of me, miserable wretch though I am, for the conversion of three persons, since I left Paris. I must always acknowledge that sweetness, humility, and patience in treating

<sup>1</sup> Collet, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> A compendium of theology written by Father Bécane, S.J.



those poor, misguided people are, as it were, the soul and life of such blessed results. I spent two days in converting one; the other two did not take me so long. I desire very much to say this to my own shame, so that the little company may see that if it pleased God to use the most ignorant and miserable of them all, He will also use each one of them, and more efficaciously too.”<sup>1</sup>

For six years this life, so humble and fruitful, had lasted, when one day, M. de Lestocq, curé of Saint-Laurent, in Paris, introduced to our saint an excellent religious, Père Adrien le Bon. He was superior of a community of Canons-Regular of Saint Victor, living at Saint-Lazare, an old leper hospital on the road from Paris to Saint-Denis. This rich priory, with large enclosure, splendid gardens, magnificent buildings, but now unoccupied, was founded more than two centuries before, in 1404, by the piety of the faithful, as an asylum for lepers. At this time there were no lepers, and no corporal or spiritual works of charity were carried on. In it was a community of Canons-Regular of Saint Victor, but they were only eight, living at their ease, and not in harmony with their superior, who was anxious for a more regular life. Troubled and disquieted, wishing to withdraw, and inquiring if these magnificent buildings could not be utilised for some charitable institution, he consulted his neighbour and friend, M. de Lestocq, curé of Saint-Laurent. “Oh!” said the latter, “this thought can only come from God, who has raised up those good missionaries.” He then related to him what we have already seen: the poor evangelised, bad confessions repaired, and all the spiritual and corporal wants of the poor country-people supplied.

<sup>1</sup> “Letters,” vol. i. p. 22.

"However," he added, "come with me and judge for yourself. I desire especially that you should see their superior, a man completely devoted to God alone."

They at once went together to the Collège des Bons-Enfants. After the usual greetings, Père le Bon said to Saint Vincent, that hearing the good work the little Company was accomplishing, he should be delighted to co-operate with it, and for that end came to offer him the priory of Saint-Lazare. On hearing this, which should have thrown anybody else into an ecstasy of joy, the humble Vincent remained silent. He did not know what to say. "Why, sir, you are trembling," said M. le Bon. "It is true, Father," replied Saint Vincent; "your proposal frightens me, and it seems so far above us, that I could not think of it. We are merely poor priests, living humbly, with no other object than to serve the poor country-people. We are very grateful to you, Father, for your good-will towards us, and we thank you very humbly, but permit us to decline your kind offer."<sup>1</sup>

So much humility touched Père le Bon. He felt that he was in the presence of a priest far superior to those with whom he was acquainted, and becoming more and more desirous of realising his intentions, begged of Saint Vincent not to finally close the matter, but to take six months to consider.

Six months passed, and Père le Bon, accompanied by M. de Lestocq, returned to the Collège des Bons-Enfants. Both renewed their entreaties, and conjured Saint Vincent to accept the priory. Père le Bon felt inspired by God to give it to him, and the curé of Saint-Laurent, a resolute and practical man, pointed out to him the advantages of accepting it. "Since my first visit,"

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. i. pp. 370-371.

said Père le Bon, "I have obtained the consent of my religious ; all that is wanted now is yours ; one word from you and the whole matter is concluded." Saint Vincent remained unshaken. "You see how few we are," he replied. "The little company has only begun. This situation and this humble house suit us. I do not like to be talked of, and the affair would make a noise. Moreover, we do not deserve this favour ; leave us in the obscurity and silence that befit us."

Upon this the bell rang for dinner, and Père le Bon, desiring to change the conversation, said to the saint, "May I have the honour of dining with you and your community ?" to which the saint assented, with his usual suavity and humility. The modest behaviour of the missionaries, the reading during the meal, the order, everything so pleased Père le Bon that he conceived such a veneration and love for them that he left with the determination of succeeding in his generous design. Père le Bon returned more than twenty times within the following six months, till it came to this, that being a great friend of Saint Vincent's, he told him many times that he was resisting the Holy Ghost, and that he should have to answer before God for his refusal, inasmuch as by this means he might establish a "Congregation complete in all respects."

M. de Lestocq could not restrain his impatience. "I could have carried M. Vincent," said he, "on my shoulders to Saint-Lazare, and won him over by the beauty and advantages of the place ; but he was insensible to exterior things, and during the eighteen months while the negotiations were going on, he never once visited Saint-Lazare."

Even the gentle and amiable Père le Bon lost patience. After a year of endeavours, he said one day to Saint

Vincent : "What kind of a man are you ? If you will not listen to us in this matter, tell us at least of whom do you take counsel ? Who is there in whom you have confidence ? What friend have you in Paris to whom we may refer to get the question settled ? I do not fear his decision, for there is no one that wishes you well, who would not advise you to accept my offer. Agree, at least, to submit to his decision." Driven to this last resource, Saint Vincent named his confessor, Doctor Duval, and promised to obey him as holding the place of God.

Doctor Duval was one of the most distinguished priests in Paris, a great theologian, orator, and even more virtuous than talented. He was Saint Vincent's confessor, was praised and admired by Saint Francis de Sales, consulted by Saint Chantal, Mother Madeleine, and Mme. Acarie ; in the opinion of Cardinal Perron, was the most enlightened man to solve cases of conscience, to calm interior trials, and of whom Saint Vincent himself said : "In him everything is holy." This learned priest did not hesitate to decide that Saint Vincent should accept the offer. Humble and obedient as a child, the saint at once went to see the house which for eighteen months he had refused to visit, and in a few hours everything was settled.

At the end of the garden, in cells, were five or six idiots, whom the religious, to fulfil as far as possible the intention of the founders, had received and cared. They were shown to Saint Vincent, who at once was moved to tears. It is this circumstance, perhaps, that finally determined him to accept the priory of Saint-Lazare.

But let us continue. Père le Bon not only wished to give his house to Saint Vincent, in order to utilise in works of charity what was intended for the lepers, but

he also wished to reform his community by association with our saint and his disciples. For this end he proposed that the two communities should form one. The disciples of Saint Vincent should wear the habit and cowl like the Canons-Regular, should take indiscriminate rank in choir, and sleep in the same dormitory. "Your disciples will not lose," said he to Saint Vincent, "and my religious cannot escape the salutary influence of so much silence, regularity, and modesty. Admiration will soon pass on to imitation."

Saint Vincent was too prudent and experienced to accede to such a request, which was more likely to transform the missionaries into canons than the canons into saints. He decidedly refused the habit, meeting in choir, and sleeping in the same dormitory. "Our rule," said he, "is to keep silence from night prayer till after dinner the next day; we then have an hour's conversation, and silence is again observed till after supper, when another hour of recreation is given. Then follows the solemn silence, which is kept so rigorously that it is only broken in case of absolute necessity, and even then what is said should be uttered in the fewest words and in a low tone. Now," he added, "whoever robs a community of this, introduces indescribable disorder and confusion. This has made a holy person say that a community which observes silence exactly, will also exactly observe the other rules; while, on the contrary, in a community where silence is not observed, it is impossible that the rest of the rules be kept. Now, Sir, there is great reason to fear that these gentlemen are unwilling to bind themselves to this, and were they not to do so, we should only destroy this practice which is so necessary, and which we have observed up to the present as well as possible."



Père le Bon, whose conduct throughout the whole affair was uniformly admirable, yielded, and everything being arranged, a settlement was drawn up, dated January 7, 1632, between Adrien le Bon and his religious of Saint-Lazare on the one hand, and Vincent de Paul and his disciples on the other.

The deed begins thus : " Leprosy not being so frequent as formerly (at present not a single leper being in Saint-Lazare), it is deemed conformable with the donors' intention to apply the revenues of the priory for the spiritual welfare of the poor country-people, living at a distance from cities, and infected with the leprosy of sin. Now since the Priests of the Mission have already devoted, and are at present devoting themselves to this excellent work with great fruit, it will be well to co-operate in establishing and increasing them, so that they may more commodiously sustain and continue their exercises and labours. Consequently, the religious of Saint-Lazare, with the good pleasure of the Pope, of the Archbishop of Paris, of the King and Parliament, resign the said priory and annex it for ever to the Congregation of the Mission." Such were the motives which made Père le Bon offer his priory to Saint Vincent. After this introduction the deed proceeds : " 1. As to the prior, he shall retain for life his residence and rank as formerly. He shall be free to attend at the services, chapter, and refectory ; to have a pension for life secured upon the revenues of the priory, the property of the company, and two estates for which Père de Gondi (formerly Admiral of the Galleys) would go security. 2. As to the religious, they shall receive an annual pension of five hundred livres each, guaranteed also by Père de Gondi, of which two hundred should be deducted, if they preferred to live in common with the missionaries. Consequently they were free to remain in

Saint-Lazare as formerly, on condition that they should be subject to the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Paris, the pension being likewise paid if they wished to live elsewhere. 3. Medical treatment for the prior and religious was to be at the expense of the Congregation of the Mission, also sepulture with the ceremony due to benefactors. Anniversary service was to be perpetual for the prior, and one year for each religious."

We may notice here with joy and gratitude the signature of Philippe-Emmanuel, who having joined the Oratory was known as Père de Gondî. Having retained his property he went security for his old and ever dear friend Vincent de Paul. His brother, Jean François de Gondî, Archbishop of Paris, did not manifest less gratitude nor faithfulness. The day after the settlement, January 8, 1632, he ratified it, beginning with a magnificent eulogium on Saint Vincent: "God, in His great mercy, has raised up in our day, in this kingdom of France, M. Vincent de Paul and his disciples, truly apostolic men and sincere lovers of Christian humility, who, by a wholly divine inspiration, leave the cities where a great number of priests, both secular and regular are to be seen working for the salvation of souls, and go out into the different villages of our diocese. They seek solely the interests of Jesus Christ by preaching, not according to human wisdom, but in the manifestation of spirit and power. They exhort the people to make general confessions and to frequent communion. They instruct the ignorant, correct and remove immorality. By our authority they establish in each parish the association of charity, and prepare the people to profitably receive our visitations; in short, they urge them by word and example, to shun vice and embrace virtue, as almost all the great ones of this kingdom will bear witness."

The Archbishop continues: "It was then our duty to give thanks to the Author of all good for having sent us such useful co-operators, as it likewise behoved our pastoral solicitude to beg of the same great and merciful God not to allow them to want for anything. God in His infinite mercy has heard and granted our prayers. For a long time we had been seeking in vain a fixed and permanent establishment for them, when a priest truly zealous for the salvation of souls, Père le Bon, and the religious of his priory, witnessing the abundant fruit reaped by these missionaries, asked our concurrence in the design of uniting the leper hospital of Saint-Lazare with the Congregation of the Mission. Now, thoroughly convinced that all grades of society, but especially country towns and villages, shall derive benefit from this institution, we accede to this opportune request, in union with the good pleasure of the Pope and King, and subject to the conditions agreed upon by the two parties. It is our wish, moreover, that we and our successors should enjoy as before in Saint-Lazare full jurisdiction and authority, with the right of spiritual and temporal visitation; that the priests of the mission should recite the Divine Office in choir, fulfil the foundations, continue to receive lepers, and that at least twelve priests should reside there, who should in turn, at the expense of the Congregation, go through the villages of our diocese, remaining in them, as necessity required, one or two months. Lastly, during quarter-tense of each year, and without interfering with the missions, they should receive the ordinands of the diocese of Paris sent by us, and maintain them gratuitously for the fifteen days during which they make the spiritual exercises."

Saint Vincent immediately took possession of Saint-Lazare. The Archbishop of Paris wished to install him, in order to manifest to his diocese the esteem and affec-

tion he had for the humble priest. We have not the official report of this solemn installation. The memoirs of the time merely state that everything passed off most satisfactorily.

Now that all these things were concluded, it would seem that Saint Vincent was to enjoy in peace that house of Saint-Lazare, which he had such difficulty and showed such detachment in accepting. But there are some who grumble at everything. It was denied that Père le Bon had the power to give up Saint-Lazare, and Saint Vincent was threatened with a lawsuit if he did not leave at once. At the very mention of the lawsuit, our saint, who abhorred disputes, declared himself willing to withdraw. Fortunately, prudent persons intervened, and showed him that it was a matter which concerned the glory of God, the salvation of souls, the relief of the poor, and the future of a Congregation that would do immense good for the Church. Hence he allowed the lawsuit to go on. While the case was being argued in court, he remained in the chapel, fervently praying on his knees at the foot of the altar. He implored God not that he might win, but that justice might prevail, and to grant him entire resignation to His holy will. During his long prayer he asked himself what he should most regret if he lost the lawsuit. It would be neither the large buildings, the beautiful enclosure, the rich priory, nor its many advantages to his rising community. There was only one thing dear to his heart and which would be difficult for him to abandon—the poor idiots in the cells at the end of the garden.<sup>1</sup>

He said this with an “artless simplicity” to a confidant—a simplicity and a sublimity that went well together.

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. i. p. 103.

## CHAPTER II

RETREATS FOR THE ORDINANDS—THE TUESDAY CON-  
FERENCES — COMMENCEMENT OF THE REFORM OF  
THE CLERGY

1628—1635

IN the deed of Mgr. Jean François de Gondi, authorising Saint Vincent to take possession of Saint-Lazare under certain conditions, we notice the following : “ Lastly, during quarter-tense of each year, and without interfering with the missions, M. Vincent de Paul and his disciples shall receive the ordinands of the diocese of Paris sent by us, maintaining them gratuitously for the fifteen days during which they make the spiritual exercises.” Who introduced this clause of such fundamental importance in the history of Saint Vincent de Paul and that of the Church of France ? Was it Mgr. de Gondi who thought of it himself ? Or rather, was it not Saint Vincent who suggested it ? We are inclined to the latter. Indeed, the more missions were given, the more it became evident that they were almost useless till the clergy were reformed. What good was it to wear themselves out with fatigue in awakening the faith and virtue of the poor country-people, if they did not leave them in the hands of pious and vigilant priests. Even when the people are confided to such pastors, how soon, alas ! do the effects of a mission disappear. What, then, if the faithful aroused by the preaching of the missionaries found no support in their curé, who was negligent, or perhaps worse ? Now, at



that time there were too many such priests. The corruption of morals of the fifteenth century, and the Protestant wars of the sixteenth, had by degrees destroyed the schools founded in the Middle Ages for the education of the clergy. Persons no longer took care to test their vocations or to prepare for ordination. To many the priesthood was only a profession, a mere livelihood, which they sought because it seemed easier and more secure than others.

It is true that the Sorbonne and the great universities of France still remained. But above everything else they gave learning, which is a very different thing from virtue. Moreover, they were accessible only to a few, the flower of the clergy, to those who were wealthy enough to live in Paris and the large cities. In fine, the crowning misfortune was that those trained in the universities considered themselves too learned for the poor country-people, and contemned such a ministry.

Hence, in the country towns and villages, there was a multitude of ignorant, dull, badly educated priests, sometimes even vicious. And in the cities what do we behold?—worldly priests, the younger sons of great families, who were forced into holy orders against their will, contending for elevated positions, aspiring to the episcopate and cardinalate, and often destitute of the virtue necessary for such positions.

No doubt—thanks to the fecundity and divinity of the Church—in the midst of all this there were many holy priests, who sighed over the degradation of their brethren, and many pious bishops who anxiously sought how to raise them from such a sad state; but how that was to be done, nobody knew.

One is saddened in reading the history of that saintly prelate Mgr. Donnadieu, who, penetrated with zeal for

the sanctity of the priesthood, required the ordinands of his diocese to prepare on the eve of their ordination by a general confession. For almost three hours he exhorted them, and in the evening sent to their lodgings to discover and reject the unworthy.

At the same period, 1628, another holy bishop, Mgr. Potier, Bishop of Beauvais, bewailed no less bitterly the wretched state of the clergy. One day he came to visit Saint Vincent, and earnestly besought him to point out a remedy for so great an evil. "My lord," replied the saint, "we must go straight to the root. It is impossible to reform ecclesiastics hardened in vice, for a bad priest is hardly ever converted. It is among the aspirants to the priesthood, and not among those already ordained, that we must work the reform of the clergy. Only admit those in whom you recognise the requisite learning and all the signs of a true vocation. Even these you should prepare as long as possible, to render them more and more worthy of the functions of the sacred ministry." His lordship was thoroughly persuaded there was no other means; but how was all this to be accomplished? Day and night he was thinking of it, but feared that all his authority would not prevail against the unwillingness of the ordinands. In the meantime, about the month of July 1628, the Bishop and the saint set out on a journey together, and began the same conversation. Suddenly the Bishop's eyes closed, and he appeared to slumber. But soon waking up, "I am not asleep," he said, "I was thinking seriously of the best way of preparing the young ecclesiastics for holy orders. For the present I cannot do better than bring them to my own house, and keep them some days, instructing them by means of regular conferences on the things they ought to know and the virtues they ought to practise. "O my lord,"

interrupted Saint Vincent in a holy transport, and speaking louder than his modesty usually allowed him, "this thought is from God ; behold an excellent way of restoring by degrees good order among the clergy." For a long time the conversation was kept up, Saint Vincent continuing to encourage the Bishop, and the Bishop becoming more and more fixed in his resolve. "It is for you, M. Vincent, to assist me to carry it out," said Mgr. Potier on leaving. "I am going to prepare everything, and you can make out in writing the order of the exercises to be followed during this retreat, and the programme of suitable matter to be treated." Then come to Beauvais fifteen or twenty days before the next ordination."—"I will obey, my lord," replied Saint Vincent, "feeling more assured, hearing it now from the mouth of the Bishop, that God demands this service of me, than if it were revealed by an angel."<sup>1</sup>

Fifteen days before the September ordination Saint Vincent arrived at Beauvais, accompanied by MM. Duchesne and Messier, both doctors of theology. He brought the programme of the exercises, which he had prepared in silence and prayer, and which was perfect and a fit model for all subsequent retreats. The Bishop himself presided at the opening, and the two doctors were to be the preachers. Saint Vincent reserved for himself the conferences, and he explained the Decalogue with such clearness, persuasiveness, and unction, that almost all the ordinands wished to make a general confession to him. M. Duchesne, who rested after his long sermons at the foot of the pulpit from which the saint was preaching, was so touched that, to the great edification of all, he too made a general confession of his whole life to Saint Vincent.

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. ii. pp. 25-26.

What had so well succeeded at Beauvais, why not try in Paris? The Bishop of Beauvais spoke to Mgr. de Gondî, Archbishop of Paris, and the latter, urged on more by M. Bourdoise, ordered by a letter dated February 21, 1631, that all aspirants to holy orders in his diocese should be obliged to prepare themselves by a retreat of ten days. M. Bourdoise at first thought of accommodating the ordinands at his own place, but the house being too small, he asked Saint Vincent to undertake the work. Our saint hesitated in the beginning, but then consented, and thus the exercises for the ordinands were begun in the Collège des Bons-Enfants. They took place every quarter-tense, ten days before the ordinations. Some years even they were compelled to multiply these retreats, so great was the number, not only in Paris, but from the neighbouring provinces, who did not wish to receive orders except they had been prepared by Saint Vincent de Paul. Not less than from eighty to a hundred attended each of these retreats, which took place five or six times a year.

How should the expenses have been defrayed, if the pious ladies whose acquaintance our saint had made had not come to his aid? But their lively faith and that instinct of Christian womanhood taught them that all these works were of the highest and most necessary character. Mme. de Herse undertook the expense for five years; the Marchioness de Meignelais left by her will eighteen thousand livres for the support of the ordinands, not to speak of what she had done during life; and lastly, the Ladies of Charity contributed a large amount. The Quêen herself, Anne of Austria, was induced by her ladies-in-waiting to assist at one of the exercises of the retreat. As she withdrew deeply affected, "O madame," said one of the ladies-of-honour, "here is

what deserves a foundation !” She promised to think the matter over, and while waiting to be able to do so, she said to Mme. de Herse that on the expiration of her five years she would support the ordinands for another five.

The great attraction of these exercises was Saint Vincent de Paul himself. Yesterday unknown, he now appeared with a reputation for piety, humility, and love of God ; and with a sacred eloquence that aroused enthusiasm. People never wearied seeing him say mass every morning. What ardent faith ! what recollection ! what tender and profound union with the Adorable Victim ! What a transformation of his countenance and whole being after holy communion ! It equalled a sermon.

On the other hand, with what humility and tenderness he received the ordinands. How he taught his disciples to receive, care, and attend the priests who came to make retreats ! “To be employed in forming good priests,” said he, “is to be fulfilling the office of Jesus Christ, who during His mortal life undertook to train twelve good priests. For that end He was pleased to dwell many years with them, instructing and forming them for this divine ministry. . . . We are then called by God to labour in this great work, for is there anything in the world so great as the dignity of a priest ? Principalities and kingdoms are not to be compared with it. Kings cannot, like a priest, change bread into the body and blood of our Lord, remit sin, and work all the other blessings that are far above earthly greatness.

“Behold our mission,” said he to them. “But who are we that this ministry should be committed to us ? We are but miserable creatures, poor labourers and peasants ; what fitness is there in such as we for so



holy, so exalted and celestial an employment? Yet it is to us that God has entrusted so great a grace as that of contributing to the reform of the clergy. To this end God did not turn to wise doctors, or to the many communities and religious houses, which are full of learning and sanctity, but He has chosen to employ this poor, mean, and pitiable Company, the last and most unworthy of all. What has God found in us to fit us for so great a work? Where are our fine deeds? What striking and illustrious actions have we performed? In what does our capacity consist? There is nothing of the sort. God of His own free will has made choice of a set of poor, miserable beings to labour to repair the breaches in the kingdom of His Son and in the ecclesiastical state. O gentlemen, let us take heed not to lose the grace which God has bestowed upon us in preference to so many learned and holy persons who were so much more worthy of it! For if we let it lie idle through our negligence, God will withdraw it from us, to give it to others, and to punish our unfaithfulness. Alas! which among us shall be the cause of so sad an evil, and will deprive the Church of so great a good? Shall it, perchance, be my miserable self? Let each one of us lay his hand on his conscience and say within himself, 'Is it I who shall be this unhappy one?' Alas! my wickedness would be enough to prevent those celestial favours, and bring down the curse of God on this house. O Lord, who seest me all covered and filled with sins, do not on my account take away Thy grace from this little company! May it continue to serve you in humility and with fidelity, and correspond with you in your design of re-establishing the honour of the Church!

"Fortunately," said he, "we have prayer, and with

it we can do all things. The poorest, the most wretched, can by prayer give to the Church good priests. It may be the prayers of a brother who does not even come in contact with the ordinands. At his ordinary work he will raise his heart to God and ask a blessing for the ordinands, and perhaps even when he is not thinking of it, God, seeing the good disposition of his heart, will grant the blessing he desires. We read in the Psalms: *'Desiderium pauperum exaudivit Dominus.'*" Here Saint Vincent suddenly stopped, forgetting the rest, and as usual, humbly turning to those near, said, "Who will tell me the remainder?" One of them then said: "*Præparationem cordis eorum audivit auris tua.*"—"Thank you, sir," replied the saint. This was his ordinary acknowledgment; and delighted with the beauty of the passage, he repeated it several times in a transport of joy and devotion, relishing its sweetness, and then he added aloud: "Wonderful manner of speaking, worthy of the Holy Spirit. *The Lord has granted the desire of the poor, has heard the preparation of their hearts;* showing us that God hears well-disposed souls, even before they pray. This is a great consolation, and ought certainly to encourage us in the service of God, however poor and miserable we feel."

To prayer he wished to join humility and cordiality. "Let us show the ordinands every mark of respect and deference, not allowing them to serve, but doing so ourselves cordially and humbly. Let us use great vigilance in attending to them and procuring without delay all they want. Be ingenious in providing for their needs, foreseeing even, if possible, their tastes and desires, and anticipating them as much as is reasonable." On their arrival he wished that there should be always a priest to meet them, see after their luggage and show them

their rooms, returning frequently to see if they required anything. He gave the example in everything himself. He delighted to go and meet them, showing them the way through the corridors with a candle in his hand, and carefully pointing out the steps lest they should trip. Sometimes even he was seen cleaning their shoes, when the number of servants or brothers was insufficient.

During the retreat for the ordinands there were two lectures a day—one in the morning, on the most necessary and practical points of the ecclesiastical state, and one in the evening, on the virtues requisite for holy orders. Saint Vincent preferred the evening instruction. In what language he extolled the dignity and sanctity of the priesthood ! How he painted the scourges bad priests brought upon the world ! “Yes,” he would say, “we are the cause of the desolation that afflicts the Church, of that deplorable falling away which she has suffered in so many places—having been almost entirely ruined in Asia, Africa, and even a great part of Europe, such as in Sweden, Denmark, England, Scotland, Holland, and in a large portion of Germany. And how many heretics do we see in France ? . . . Yes, Lord, we have provoked your anger, we have by our sins incurred those calamities. Yes, it is the clerics and those who aspire to the ecclesiastical state, to the sub-diaconate, diaconate, and priesthood, and we who are already ordained that have brought this catastrophe on the Church.” And going into detail he went through the grades of the clergy. Some are useless—“they say the breviary, offer the holy sacrifice, and even that very indifferently ; while others administer the sacraments by routine. But a great many are buried in vice and disorder.” He alluded to priests of an entire province so addicted to intemper-

ance, that an assembly of bishops had to seek a remedy for so ignoble a state of affairs, and could not succeed. "This is not the case," he added by way of consolation, "with all the clergy. No, O Saviour, there are also holy ecclesiastics. Often here in retreat there are curés and others who come from a distance to renew their interior spirit. And how many good and holy priests in Paris! There is a large number, and there is not one of those who come here for the conference but is a model. They labour with the greatest fruit. If then there are bad ecclesiastics in the world, and I am the worst and most sinful of all, there are, to make up for them, some who honour God by the holiness of their lives."<sup>1</sup>

He spoke thus of himself to have an opportunity of speaking so to others.

Under these conditions it is not surprising that they came from all parts to the retreats at Saint-Lazare. Through it passed every year five or six hundred young priests, and among them the *élite* of the clergy of France. We may name, among others, M. Olier, who was soon to found Saint-Sulpice;<sup>2</sup> Armand de Rancé, the reformer of la Trappe;<sup>3</sup> Fleury, the historian of the Church, and Bossuet, who was one day to write to Pope Clement XI.: "From our youth we have known that venerable priest, Vincent de Paul, and it was at his pious discourses we imbibed the true principles of Christian piety and of ecclesiastical discipline; remembrance of him, even now, is sweet."<sup>4</sup>

How many others might we cite! More than eighty bishops, and innumerable doctors. "O gentlemen!" Saint Vincent used to say to his confrères, "it is not by

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. ii. pp. 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> Faillon, vol. i. p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Dubois, vol. i. chap. x.

<sup>4</sup> Floquet.

learning that you shall do good, nor by the beauty of your language. Our audience is more learned than we are. Many are bachelors and some licentiates in theology, others doctors in law, and there are few who are not versed in philosophy, and to some extent in theology. They have discussions every day, and almost nothing that we can say is new to them, for they have already read or heard it. They themselves confess that it is not our eloquence which appeals to them, but rather the virtue they see practised here."

These first years of the retreats for the ordinands had on the Church of France an influence hidden at first, but at the same time profound. They awakened the sacred fire of the priesthood, brightened its flame, and caused the greatest men not only no longer to blush at the name of priest and ordination, but to glory in them. M. de Gondi (formerly Admiral of the Galleys), M. de la Rochefoucauld, M. Olier, M. Bossuet, fulfilled in the parishes of Paris the humble functions of deacon, sub-deacon, and acolyte, in obedience to the zealous M. Bourdoise, until in their dioceses or parishes they had revived piety and ecclesiastical discipline.

"We must tell you," wrote Saint Vincent in 1633, only five years after the opening of the exercises, "that God in His great goodness has bestowed very special and almost incredible blessings on these retreats for the ordinands; so much so, that those who have made them lead lives worthy of good and perfect ecclesiastics. There are even many distinguished by their birth or talent, who live as regular as we do here, and are even more interior than many among us. They have their order of day, their meditation, mass, examinations of conscience, just like ourselves. They visit the hospitals and prisons, where they catechise, preach, hear confessions, as also in the



colleges, with special benediction from God. Among many others there are twelve or fifteen who live in this manner in Paris. They are persons of distinction, and are beginning to be appreciated by the public.”<sup>1</sup>

This odour of priestly piety was beginning to bear fruit. Not only did persons no longer blush at the name of priest and at the ceremonies of the sacred ministry, but great lords were to be seen abandoning the most exalted positions to become simple priests. M. de Gondi led the way, M. de Sillery followed,<sup>2</sup> and M. de Ventadour came next. “He was a duke,” said Saint Vincent de Paul, “and he became a priest.”<sup>3</sup> Many began to follow his example. M. de la Marguerie, formerly President of the province, was only ten days after him. “Among the ordinands we have a member of the Great Council, and a Master of the Exchequer who wish to remain and become priests. M. de Mégrigny, Advocate-General, has retired with M. Brandon to Saint-Maur for the same end.”<sup>4</sup>

From these exercises bishops also were beginning to come forth. “The assembly of the ecclesiastics belonging to the Tuesday Conferences seems to me to become better and better. Behold, three bishops have been chosen from among them—M. Godeau of Grasse, M. Fouquet of Bayonne, M. Pavillon of Alet; and M. Barreau has just been nominated by the King coadjutor of Sarlat. God has taken to Himself good M. Seaüsse, who lived and died like a saint.”

Useful, however, and beneficial as were these exercises, they were not enough. The fire now lighted should be kept up. Some means should be devised of affording the young priests an opportunity of rekindling their

<sup>1</sup> “Letters,” vol. i. p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* vol. ii. p. 374.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* vol. i. p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* vol. i. p. 291.

fervour at its very source. Saint Vincent was thinking so, but being a man who hurried in no undertaking, he was anticipated by another, a fact he by no means regretted.

One day a young priest, one of those who had made the exercises, came to him and asked if he thought it well that those, who were desirous of preserving the grace of ordination, should meet every week in Saint-Lazare, to hear a few words of encouragement and to renew their good resolutions.<sup>1</sup> "O my child!" immediately exclaimed Saint Vincent, "that thought is from heaven. However, we must reflect and pray." He went at once to confer with Mgr. de Gondi, Archbishop of Paris, and he even wrote to the Pope, who blessed and approved of the project.

Who was the young man who initiated this grand work of the Tuesday Conferences? Some think it was M. Olier.<sup>2</sup> What is certain is that, according to all historians, his name heads the list of those who were the first to join, and that nobody under Saint Vincent contributed more to the success of the organisation.

These conferences, the first of which took place on June 25, 1633, and the second, July 9, were to be held every Tuesday. Priests came to them from all parts of Paris. But we must not think that they were merely conferences which persons attended when they wished, in order to hear Saint Vincent de Paul. Our saint, who was gifted with an extraordinary power of organisation, drew up rules himself. Under the direction of the superior-general of the mission, there was a president, with two assistants, and a secretary, who constituted the committee of the conference. To become a member,

<sup>1</sup> Faillon, vol. i. pp. 68, 78.

<sup>2</sup> Abelly says the contrary, vol. ii. chap. iii.

it was necessary to be nominated by three existing members, and the reception was only after diligent investigation. The director himself introduced the new member and embraced him, which all did in their turn. From that day forward he was subject to the president, who admonished him of his faults, visited or had him visited during sickness and at the hour of death, and all the members attended his funeral. They were all to be united in Jesus Christ by a new bond of love; to cherish, visit, console, and assist one another to become worthy of Him. A general meeting was to be held at two o'clock every Tuesday in Saint-Lazare. Those who could not attend were to send their apologies to the president. The conference opened with the *Veni Creator*, intoned by the director, after which a subject appointed at the last conference was discussed, each one having an opportunity of speaking. After that the director closed the conference by some remarks which he deemed useful, concluding with a few simple and affecting words. This was the ordinary duty of Saint Vincent, and in this he excelled. He had no pretensions to oratory, but he prayed much before speaking, and meditated deeply on the Sacred Scriptures. His heart was on fire with the love of God and men, and all this produced a simple, warm, persuasive sermon, that enlightened the intellect and moved the will. If a bishop happened to come to the conference, which often occurred, and if Saint Vincent retired in his favour, a thing he always did, it caused general disappointment. Often, even after the bishop, all begged of the saint to speak; but this deeply embarrassed his humility, and added a new attraction to his words. "We were together," wrote Bossuet, "at those conferences of ecclesiastics that met every week to discuss some pious topic. When we listened to the

saint, every one felt that the Apostle's words were being fulfilled : "*If any one speak, let his word be as from God.*" M. Tronson, the second superior of Saint-Sulpice, so calm, so grave and recollected, could not restrain his transports of admiration. "Oh !" he would say, "how that man is all for God !" And it was the parting word of all the priests to the missionaries as they went away after the conference : "Oh ! how happy you are to see and hear every day a man so filled with the love of God !"

But besides this first and great effect of Saint Vincent's preaching, which was to warm all hearts, and thus prepare the way for the reform of the clergy, there was a second, not indeed so exalted, but which we must not omit. The characteristic of his preaching was its simplicity—"his admirable simplicity," says Bossuet, "and with it his gentleness, love of God and of souls, together with the purity of the sources from which he drew, which were the Sacred Scripture, the example and preaching of Jesus Christ, and a deep knowledge of the instincts and passions of the human heart." This is exactly what was wanting to pulpit oratory in 1633. Instead of finding in Sacred Scripture the proof of what was taught, it was taken from the pagan poets. Père Catton, chaplain and confessor of Henry IV., to prove the certainty of death, cited Homer, Virgil, and Horace, and introduced without taste or selection the discoveries of medicine. Père Senault likewise filled his sermon with Greek and Latin texts to prove the power of the demons. Preachers spoke Latin, and for a long time before women and vergers they had even spoken Greek. In order to preach so badly it was necessary to know a great deal. What they did not seek among the ancient poets they looked for among the schoolmen, and thus were made divisions,

and subdivisions, and minor divisions, which made Père Rapin say, that the reading of Saint Thomas, grand and systematic as he is, produced more bad preachers than good ones. And what shall we say of their style, of that pompous and flowery language, which Saint Francis de Sales said that his good taste and judgment made him almost shun, but which is spread throughout the works of his very dear disciple and friend, Mgr. Camus, Bishop of Belley ?

It was impossible for so many young priests to meet at those Tuesday Conferences, and speak on all kinds of moral and dogmatic subjects, without introducing some of the bad taste which reigned everywhere. But Saint Vincent was stern. Simplicity, holy and divine simplicity, should alone be found there. He corrected, and sometimes severely, those who abandoned it. "Imagine," he writes, "I was obliged during one of the ordinations to go on my knees twice and beg a priest not to be wandering into those high flights, and yet he would not give in. Hence God delivered us from this vain mind."<sup>1</sup> "God knows, that as many as three times, during three consecutive days, I went on bended knees before a priest who was then belonging to the little company, but is so no longer, and asked him to preach and speak in all simplicity, without ever being able to win him over. He gave the sermons for the ordinands without producing any fruit, and all his studied thoughts and chosen periods passed like smoke ; for, in truth, it is not flowery language that benefits souls, but simplicity and humility, which open and touch hearts by the grace of Jesus Christ." It soon became a rule to speak with simplicity. "The externs who attend the conferences in Saint-Lazare profess to treat the subjects very simply, and when any

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. iii. p. 251.



one becomes ostentatious of his learning or language, immediately they complain to me, so that there may be a remedy applied. The last to do so was M. Tristan, a doctor of theology, who is a member. However, notwithstanding this simple method among us, our Lord grants each one the desire to belong to us.”<sup>1</sup> “Would you believe, sir,” he wrote on this subject, “that actors, recognising the beauty of simplicity, have changed their manner of speaking, and no longer recite their parts in a high tone, as they did formerly, but speak in a medium voice and familiarly to their audience? One of them told me so a few days ago. Now, if in order the better to please the world, actors have changed their method, what a subject of confusion to the preachers of Jesus Christ if their love and zeal for souls do not make them change theirs.”<sup>2</sup>

Often bishops came to the conferences and spoke. If they made use of pompous or flowery language, Saint Vincent remained silent in his place, and merely by his deportment the young priests felt how disagreeable it was to him. If, on the contrary, the Bishop spoke simply, the saint was delighted. The Bishop of Sarlat having preached in Saint-Lazare, Saint Vincent went to his room. “My lord,” he said, “you have converted me to-day.”—“How is that, Sir?”—“Because you spoke so plainly and simply, that it seemed to me very touching, and I could not refrain from thanking God.”—“Ah, Sir,” replied the Bishop, “I must confess to you with equal candour that I might easily have said something more polished and more elevated, but had I done so, I should have offended God.” Still more edified, Saint Vincent did not fail, as usual, to write both the Bishop’s sermon and the conversation to his

<sup>1</sup> “Letters,” vol. i. p. 397.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* vol. i. p. 228.

confrères who were absent on the mission. Thus we read in the letter just cited: "Our ordinands, thanks be to God, have left well satisfied, after giving us great edification. His lordship the Bishop of Sarlat gave them the evening instruction exceedingly well, and, as we have seen lately, the reason of his success is found in his humility in following word for word the programme of these instructions as drawn up by the first to give them. He neither introduced far-fetched thoughts nor novel expressions, as others have done before, who utterly failed from not keeping to the simple method and to the point."<sup>1</sup>

No one was a greater lover of that simplicity, or profited more by such advice, than Bossuet. "The sublime simplicity of Saint Vincent," said M. Floquet, "profoundly appealed to Bossuet, himself so simple. To the end of his life, speaking frequently of Saint Vincent, of his prodigious charity, and of the eminent qualities which he admired in him, he particularly dwelt on his simplicity, which attracted him most. '*His simplicity, his admirable simplicity,*' he used to say with evident emotion; and we have it from those who lived with him that the great orator never tired speaking of this characteristic virtue of the saint."<sup>2</sup> He remembered it all his life, and made it a rule in preaching.

Conferences where the most distinguished clergy assembled, and the greatest bishops used to speak, could not but stir all Paris. The report reached Richelieu, who, half pious and half politic, wished nothing to go on without his knowledge, and accordingly sent for Saint Vincent and got an account of

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. ii. p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Floquet, vol. i. p. 167.

the nature, object, and progress of his conferences. Delighted with what he heard, he exhorted him to persevere in all his good works, promising his support, and inviting him to visit him from time to time. Towards the end of the interview Richelieu asked to see the list of members, with a mark over those that the saint judged suitable for the mitre. He himself wrote down their names for presentation to the King, and then dismissed the saint. "I already had a great opinion of M. Vincent," said Richelieu shortly afterwards to the Duchess d'Aiguillon, "but I look upon him as altogether another man since my last interview with him."<sup>1</sup> The Cardinal took the saint's advice and promoted many of Saint Vincent's disciples to the episcopate.

What Richelieu had begun, Louis XIII., on the Cardinal's death, wished to continue. Often he secretly sent to our saint to have a list forwarded of the priests whom he deemed worthy of being made bishops. Saint Vincent willingly complied with the request, but on one condition, namely, that the King and ministers promised absolute secrecy. "Otherwise," said he, "the Tuesday Conferences, instead of forming saints, would turn out hypocrites and place-hunters."

Thus was begun the reform of the clergy, thus were laid the first stones of the great Church of France. I say the first, for however important the retreats for the ordinands and the Tuesday Conferences were, they were not enough. They merely influenced the clergy of Paris and its environs, and even only the *élite* of them, for the conferences were hardly known in the provinces. For the reform of the clergy of France something deeper and wider, something that touched

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. ii. p. 71.

and renewed every diocese, was wanting. What was wanting was what the Council of Trent had foreseen, what Saint Charles had endeavoured to supply but imperfectly, what Saint Francis de Sales had not even dared to attempt, but what has since become the greatness, the power, the fecundity of the Church of France—ecclesiastical seminaries.

## CHAPTER III

### ECCLESIASTICAL SEMINARIES

1635-1642

AMONG the disciplinary decrees of the Council of Trent there is perhaps not one more important, nor one which has exercised a more salutary influence on the Church, and especially on the Church of France, than the decree relating to the erection of ecclesiastical seminaries. When signing it, the Fathers rejoiced, and declared that they were adequately repaid for all their labours if even the Council had done nothing else. If they spoke thus, what shall we say who have seen their decree realised after innumerable obstacles, and produce in France a clergy every day more regular and devoted ?

In the first place let us listen to the words of the holy Council of Trent : "Whereas young people, unless well brought up, are prone to follow the voluptuousness of the world, and unless from their youth they have been trained in piety and religion before habits of vice have taken possession of the whole man, they never will perfectly, and without the greatest, and well-nigh special, help of God, persevere in ecclesiastical discipline ; the holy Council ordains that all cathedral, metropolitan, and other churches greater than these, shall be bound, each according to its means and the extent of the diocese, to support, to rear in piety, and to train in ecclesiastical discipline, a certain number of youths of their city, diocese, or province, in a college to be chosen



by the Bishop for this purpose near the said churches, or in some other suitable place.

“In this college let those be received who, having been born in lawful wedlock, have at least attained their twelfth year, are able to read and write passably, and whose naturally good and pious disposition gives token that they will always continue in the service of the Church. It is the wish of the Council that the children of the poor should be preferred, though not excluding the rich, provided they defray their own expenses and manifest a desire and love for the service of God and His Church.

“The Bishop having divided these students into as many classes as he thinks fit, according to their number, age, and progress, shall apply some of them in the service of the Church when he thinks proper, and retain the others in the college, always replacing those whom he called out, so that the college may be a perpetual seminary for the service of God.

“And that they may the more easily be trained in ecclesiastical discipline, they shall wear the clerical dress and tonsure from the time of their entrance. They shall learn grammar, chant, the ecclesiastical calendar, and all the other liberal arts ; they shall be instructed in Sacred Scripture, ecclesiastical books, homilies of the saints, the administration of the sacraments, especially what is calculated to enable them to hear confessions—in fine, all the ceremonies and usages of the Church. The Bishop shall see that they attend holy mass daily, confess at least once a month, receive holy communion with the advice of their confessor, and on festivals serve in the cathedral or local churches.”

The holy Council then proceeds to lay down the financial conditions of these new institutions. The

resources were to be levied on the revenues of the bishoprics, chapters, abbeys, priories, and in general on all benefices. The more to accentuate the sovereign importance it attaches to these necessary institutions, the Council threatens with severe penalties those archbishops and bishops who neglect to establish them.

At first sight the erection of these seminaries seemed easy. To take the youth of good families, to guard them from the dangers of the world, to train them in piety, always so attractive to the young, to prepare them by degrees for the priesthood, to show them its beauty, and to impress them with the thought of its greatness, so as to present them for ordination burning with the love of God and souls, what could be easier? But besides the human passions which are to be found even in the hearts of the smallest children; besides that propensity to evil, to spiritual sloth, to seeking ease, to ambition for honours and dignities, which quenches the most ardent zeal and dims the highest ideal, we must also take account of the institutions that had been but were no more, of those colleges, academies, and universities whose débris was tripping the reformers at every step, binding them to the past, and hindering them in realising the ideal of the Council of Trent.

It was because of that everything failed. Gregory XIII., desiring to show the example, founded the Roman College, but it was only an academy giving a course of lectures and conferences to externs. Saint Charles established at Milan two or three seminaries, and seemed to have better understood the intention of the Council of Trent, for from him M. Olier confesses to have borrowed the plan of his seminary. But notwithstanding Saint Charles' virtue, the seminaries did not extend beyond Milan or that province. Another holy bishop, Bartholomew de

Martyribus, established a seminary in the episcopal city of Braga, in Portugal, but though renowned for his sanctity, he did not induce any other bishop to follow his example. Saint Francis de Sales seems not even to have tried the work. One day M. Bourdoise expressed his astonishment that he had not devoted his talents to training ecclesiastics. "I acknowledge," said the holy Bishop, "and am thoroughly convinced, that there is nothing more necessary in the Church, but having laboured for seventeen years to bring up merely three priests to assist me to reform the clergy of my diocese, I was only able to produce one and a half."

In France the work was still less advanced, inasmuch as many had tried and failed, so that even the best inclined thought the scheme impossible. Every provincial council returned to the subject and insisted upon it. The Council of Rouen in 1581, of Bordeaux in 1582, of Rheims and Tours in 1583, of Bourges in 1584, of Aix in 1585, of Toulouse in 1586, and lastly, in 1629, the assembly of the French clergy, renewed all these decrees, and ordered the immediate erection of at least four national seminaries. But the bishops who signed this resolution, returned to their dioceses not knowing how to put it in practice, and reluctantly abandoned a work which they deemed necessary, but almost impossible.

What increased their discouragement was, that saintly bishops and others who had immense resources at their disposal had tried the work, but failed. Cardinal de Joyeuse, Archbishop of Rouen ; Cardinal de Sourdis, Archbishop of Bordeaux ; the Cardinal de Lorraine, Archbishop of Rheims, all saw their seminaries after ten or twelve years dwindle away, or if they subsisted at all, they had degenerated into mere colleges from which no

priests came forth. Even Richelieu, accustomed to be obeyed, had not succeeded here.

Now it was said, if such men have failed, how can we hope to succeed? As a matter of fact, the work was abandoned by all parties as impossible.

Yet, in spite of those great obstacles, the hour fixed by Divine Providence for the erection of ecclesiastical seminaries was approaching. There were then in France three or four holy priests diligently studying this difficult problem and preparing themselves to confront it. One was designing this thing, another adding that, one planning, another destined to carry out the plan, and all about to realise the beautiful ideal of the Council of Trent. These three or four holy priests were: M. de Bérulle, of the Rue Saint-Jacques; M. Bourdoise, at the seminary of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet; M. Vincent, at the Collège des Bons-Enfants; and M. Olier, at Vaugirard—the four in the closest intimacy, and inflamed with zeal for the reform of the clergy.

M. de Bérulle was the oldest and the most eminent in the eyes of the world. He was a cardinal, but, as Bossuet said, the purple added nothing to his merit. Having established the Carmelites in Paris and throughout France, he was just then founding the Oratory, in which we must also admire: Père de Condren (of whom we shall speak later on), Père de Bourgoing (whose funeral oration Bossuet delivered), and soon afterwards Père le Jeune, Père Malebranche, Père Thomassin, and Père Massillon. M. de Bérulle's object was to devote his entire Congregation to the education of the clergy and the direction of seminaries. That nothing might interfere with this plan, he asked the Pope, when having the rules approved, to strictly forbid his priests to be employed in colleges, in order that they might reserve them-

selves exclusively for seminaries. It is a strange fact, and one which would seem to show that the finger of God was directing more than people thought, the least details in the growth of these religious orders—this prohibition was the only point that was omitted by the Pope in his Bull of Approbation. Hence the Pope not having forbidden it, and the tendency of the time urging them on, the Oratorians took up colleges, and by degrees abandoned the work of the seminaries. Pious historians think that it was by a special providence of God that this prohibition was omitted in the Pope's Bull; for the Oratory gradually having fallen into Jansenism, what should have become of the French clergy, if it had almost the entire education of the ecclesiastics? When dying, in 1629, Cardinal de Bérulle handed over the government of his Congregation to Père de Condren, a man of exceptional virtue, of supernatural wisdom, and destined to have a sovereign influence on the creation of ecclesiastical seminaries.

The second of these holy men working for the reform of the clergy was M. Bourdoise. He was a simple priest without fame or pretensions, a curé of one of the poorest parishes, but with a heart of an Elias and a John the Baptist. He wept over the desecration of the sanctuary, and endowed with a strong mind and originality of expression, he used his gifts to stigmatise the disorders among the clergy. Neither priest nor bishop nor cardinal could escape his sarcasm; nothing stopped him, so great was the holy emotion which urged him to speak. Always wearing the soutane and tonsure, he stigmatised those priests who were dressed as laics and sometimes as military men. He stopped in the streets, went to the houses of the priests most distinguished by their virtue, birth, and



fortune, the Vincents, the Oliers, the Bretonvilliers, the Gondis, and the Bossuets, making them carry the censers and torches, or read the epistle, in order to shame the priests who blushed at those humble but holy functions. If he had devoted himself to founding seminaries, what should he not have done? But he thought, like so many others, that seminaries were impossible. Instead of training the rising generation, he only laboured to sanctify those already ordained. He formed them into communities; taught them to meditate, to live in common, obey the first sound of the bell, and to scrupulously carry out the smallest ceremonies of the Church. With such communities he filled France. He established them in Paris, and thus in a manner prepared the way for seminaries, for he showed how students might be brought to live in common, since it had been successfully tried with priests. Still those communities did not last, and one who had belonged to them for ten years gives the reason: "Although we had little solid instruction in these communities," said he, "nevertheless God kept me there for ten years. Many others as young as myself joined, but not one persevered, and I cannot say why, seeing that there were no disorders in them."<sup>1</sup> Men cannot be kept together with no other aim than to practise ceremonies.

The third person trying to solve this deep problem of the seminaries was Saint Vincent. At first he did not intend to do so. The constitutions which he had sent to the Pope for approbation, made no mention of ecclesiastical seminaries, and not even did the Bull itself dated 1632. Later on, when the opinion was spreading that the clergy would never be reformed except by seminaries, and people were urging him to devote himself to them,

<sup>1</sup> Saint-Beuve, vol. i. p. 425.



the saint still replied that his work was to give missions, that the Pope had approved of his Congregation for that end, and that only an angel from heaven could persuade him to abandon a work which had so wonderfully succeeded, for another which up to the present had failed.

At length, urged by most holy bishops, he undertook the work, and in 1635 made his first attempt. He received into the Collège des Bons-Enfants twelve or fourteen young students to prepare them for the priesthood. Whether it was that they were too young, or that their directors were incapable, the endeavour did not succeed and had to be given up. Six years afterwards, in 1641, at the earnest solicitation of the pious Mgr. Juste Guérin, Bishop of Annecy, he made a second attempt in the episcopal city, this time receiving only those who had read their humanity. They were approaching the end of their studies, when again, without any apparent reason, the work failed, and the seminary was closed, not to be reopened till 1663. It was the same with the seminaries of Alet and Saintes. At last, in 1642, Saint Vincent felt that the real cause of so many successive failures was to be found in the mixing of the seminarists proper with the young students, under a code of discipline not applicable to both. He determined then to separate them. He retained the seminarists in the Collège des Bons-Enfants, and placed the students in a house that was purchased at the end of the grounds, called the Seminary of Saint Charles. By this master-stroke he founded once for all what has never since been abandoned—large and small seminaries.

While Saint Vincent was thus slowly and patiently realising the decree for the institution of seminaries,

there was near him a priest, still young, whom God was guiding to the same end in a most rapid and marvellous manner. Few men have been more privileged than M. Olier. Saint Francis de Sales had blessed his infancy, Saint Vincent de Paul had trained and prepared him for holy orders, and Père de Condren had directed his maturer years and revealed to him his true vocation. Having gone through the exercises for the ordinands, and having been one of the first two, if not absolutely the first, to contribute to establish the Tuesday Conferences, he for many years confessed to Saint Vincent, whom he tenderly loved. But suddenly between those two saintly friends a thin, delicate cloud arose that embarrassed both. Saint Vincent was anxious that M. Olier should become a bishop, to which the latter felt a decided repugnance. To evade obedience to his holy director, M. Olier set out for Auvergne, where he gave missions on the lands attached to his Abbey of Pébrac. On the way he met a holy religious, since declared venerable by Pius VII., Mother Agnes de Langeac, and told her of his anxieties. She, enlightened by God, as has since been proved, advised him to consult Père de Condren. This was M. de Bérulle's successor in the Oratory, a man of extraordinary virtue and wisdom. He was neither an administrator nor a writer nor an orator, but endowed with a gift, to which he sacrificed everything, of inflaming by his conversation and burning zeal both priests and laics who came in contact with him. Cardinal de Bérulle, his superior, and a man of great interior enlightenment, often kissed the ground he trod. Saint Vincent entertained for him no less esteem. "The saint often spoke of him in language which seemed incredible," said M. Olier, "and I remember his saying to me, 'No man is to be found like him,' and a number

of similar expressions. When he heard of his death, throwing himself on his knees and striking his breast, he accused himself, with tears in his eyes, of not having honoured that man as much as he deserved." Saint Chantal spoke equally high of him. "If God," she said, "has given our holy founder to the Church to instruct men, it seems to me He has made Père de Condren capable of instructing angels." In fine, M. Olier pays him this magnificent tribute : "We saw only the covering and appearance, for within he was totally another being, living the interior of Jesus Christ in his hidden life, so that it was more Jesus Christ living in him than Père de Condren living in himself. He was like the Host on our altars : we see the accidents and appearance of bread, but in reality it is Jesus Christ. So it was with this great servant of our Lord."<sup>1</sup>

M. Olier came then to consult Père de Condren, who, having heard him, said, "You must not think of becoming a bishop. God designs you for something not less useful to the Church."<sup>2</sup> At the time he seemed to be gathering into the ranks of the clergy some eminent men whom he wished to make use of for some great purpose. Thus he prevented from being elevated to the episcopacy M. du Ferrier, M. de Coulet, and many others. When Cardinal Richelieu was asking for some who were worthy of the episcopate, after mentioning a number, Père de Condren said, "There are still more, but God is reserving them for an all-important work."<sup>3</sup>

Père de Condren was now about to die ; he had not more than eight days to live, and as yet had not revealed to any one "that great design, that all-important work," for which he had been reserving such eminent priests.

<sup>1</sup> Faillon, Vie de M. Olier, vol. i. p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* p. 129.

At last, on December 30, 1640, as there was no longer any doubt of his approaching death, having received M. du Ferrier, a friend of M. Olier, he determined to open his mind to him. His words are as solemn as those of a last will and testament, and are of interest to the entire Church. He opened the question with M. du Ferrier; but not being free then, and wishing to have a longer conversation on so important a subject, he asked him to return the next day.

"The following day, after mass," writes M. du Ferrier, "I went at eight o'clock to Père de Condren, and found with him M. de Renty, who retired on my arrival. He then began; and having shown that the fruit of missions, though excellent, would be lost if it were not preserved by good ecclesiastics, he said he had come to the conclusion that it was necessary to labour in forming good priests. He would leave out of the question those already advanced in years and ordained without preparation, for it hardly ever happens that a bad priest is converted. 'This ought to convince us,' he added, 'of the necessity of bringing up the young students in the ecclesiastical spirit, which can never be accomplished except by seminaries, as the Council of Trent has pointed out.' On hearing this, I reminded him of the difficulties which people thought insuperable, and that it was useless to try to establish seminaries when, after more than sixty years, those of Toulouse, Bordeaux, and Rouen had failed, notwithstanding the great care bestowed upon them by Cardinals de Joyeuse and de Sourdis. He showed me that people were deceived, and that there was nothing easier, provided those admitted were of a certain age, and were such that their judgment, already developed, would enable them to decide after some trial whether they had a true voca-

tion. He dwelt at great length on this subject, and encouraged me to rely on the assistance which God would undoubtedly give to the undertaking. He added even that there was no time to be lost, for the wicked spirit would not fail to create dissensions and troubles to prevent this good work of forming ecclesiastics. We were then in a time of great tranquillity, and there was then no question of those opinions which have since caused such division and damage in the Church. He warned us, in fine, always to submit to the Pope, avoiding controversy and disputes, according to the advice of Saint Paul.

“It struck ten o’clock, and Brother Martin, his assistant, came to remind him that it was the time to say mass, but he was told to wait a while. At eleven the brother returned and urged him again to prepare. Then to my surprise, Père de Condren, that prudent and most circumspect man, made this reply, ‘My brother, if you knew at what I am engaged you would not hurry me, for I am doing far more than what you want me to do.’ Having continued the conversation till near twelve, he then said, ‘Brother Martin will get impatient, let us defer the rest till to-morrow morning.’ He went then to say mass, and I left, never again to see him alive. Returning the next day, I found that he was very bad with inflammation of the lungs, and the doctors had forbidden him to speak, so that I did not see him.”

He died two days afterwards a death of extraordinary sanctity, which astounded and edified his disciples even more than his beautiful life. M. Olier and his friends assisted at the obsequies, and, faithful to the holy priest’s instructions, began the seminary of Saint-Sulpice.

Was there any difference between the seminaries founded by Saint Vincent de Paul and those by M.



Olier ? None. Both men had similar views, and all their plans were blended gradually into one.

A seminary is a conservatory (*seminarium*), a place where precious seedlings and plants still too tender to be exposed to the air, are sheltered from the north winds. Thus it was our Lord acted when He Himself trained in solitude and silence His twelve Apostles before sending them out to convert the world. How far more necessary was such a separation from the world for those young students, especially when it was a question of preparing them for so exalted a mission. Time and quiet were necessary for a student to examine his mind and to discover if it should recoil before the great sacrifices that the priesthood demands. Nor were time and recollection less necessary to the directors to discover those who had true vocations, and to see if each student had sufficient virtue, courage, judgment, and capacity to have souls entrusted to him. And again, when a vocation was clear, time, vigilance, and constant efforts were required to solidly establish in the student's character those virtues necessary to overcome all the dangers to which the priest is exposed. Thus it was from the first ages, thus were the clerics reared in the cloisters of Saint Benedict, and in the episcopal and cathedral schools of the Middle Ages. The greatest bishops and the most eminent popes were those whose youth was passed in solitude and silence, far away from the world. Then came the universities, taking the ecclesiastics away, and exposing them to public life. But what was the gain ? Were they not formed worldly and dissipated ? It was therefore evident that they must return to the old traditions and reopen to the young ecclesiastics houses of silence and retreat, where they might be trained in virtue and ecclesiastical learning.

Virtue and learning are the two great requisites in a

priest. Without learning he is useless, without virtue he is dangerous. It was of the priest's learning our Lord said, "*You are the light of the world.*" It was of his virtue He said, "*You are the salt of the earth.*" Learning is purified, refined, made humble and fruitful by virtue, and virtue elevated and ennobled by learning. A virtuous priest—oh, how venerable! A learned priest—oh, how beautiful! But a virtuous and a learned priest, whose countenance reveals learning and whose heart is inflamed with virtue, before such a priest we bow in reverence as before the truest image of God on earth!

All the exercises of a seminary tend to form such a priest, for in it learning and piety are combined with the greatest discretion. Prayer, holy mass, confession and frequent communion, spiritual reading, the rosary, and the particular examen make students holy priests; while the study of the Sacred Scriptures, of dogmatic and moral theology, of the liturgy and canon law, make them learned. They pass from the one to the other without fatigue, and with moderate attention they leave the seminary sufficiently grounded in virtue and learning to enable them, without danger to themselves, to come in contact with those whom God should confide to their care.

Science taught in the seminaries is different from that taught in the universities. No doubt sacred science is one, but like other sciences it is divided into lower and higher branches. It was the latter that was taught in the universities, producing doctors and men capable of refuting the most formidable enemies of the Church. Altogether different is the aim of a seminary, for here it is not so much doctors as pastors that are to be formed. What is necessary is a middle course, a compendious and exact knowledge which clearly shows

the principles and embraces the necessary teaching. The more gifted may go higher, but even for them this middle course is necessary. It lays a solid and sure foundation, the absence of which even the best will feel.

It is this very point that Saint Vincent explains with his usual common-sense and clearness. The question was raised whether the professors in the seminaries should use an author and content themselves with explaining it, or whether it would be better for them to write themselves or give dictates. Many preferred the dictates, which afforded the professor an opportunity of exhibiting his talent. Saint Vincent held the contrary. "With an approved author," said he, "the teaching will be surer, the bishops more confident, the little company less exposed to envy and censure, professors more easily obtained, their work less severe, and lastly, the students better formed and instructed." It was objected that professors who did not write would be thought less of and tempted to leave the seminary. That would be true, perhaps, if there were no other attractions in the seminary but science, and if all the students were savants ; but piety, chant, ceremonies, catechising and preaching were also to be taught.

Again, it was urged against his view that professors would become more learned. That may be, he said, but they would do nothing else but study, compose, and dictate, and that being the case, what should become of piety, chant, ceremonies, catechising, and preaching ? Who, moreover, would look after discipline ? Lastly, the example of the Jesuits and of the universities was adduced. "But that is another matter," replied Saint Vincent ; "they make public profession of teaching the sciences, and have to maintain their reputation. On the

other hand, in a seminary there is more need of piety and average knowledge, with an acquaintance with ceremonies, chant, preaching, and catechising, than there is of extensive learning. I assure you if we enter on our duties in this spirit you will soon have it said in the little company that we ought to lecture publicly and have more deeply learned professors in the seminaries. Under these circumstances, alas ! what should become of the poor country-people, and in what spirit should we compete with those other learned bodies ? Where should be the humility in which God founded, reared, and developed this little company up to the present ? ”

But if in the seminaries so much care is to be taken in giving the students that “respectable mediocrity” which is necessary for each, and sufficient for all, what is to be said of the manner in which they are to be formed in virtue ? We may place a limit to learning, but none to virtue. The lowest may become the highest. If it were only to direct, to purify, to save a village of three hundred souls, we are never sufficiently holy. Moreover, everywhere temptations are to be met. Vice needs not necessarily to be clothed in silk ; and always to conquer and preserve his soul unsullied, the priest must be of a virtue almost divine. Everywhere, too, in remote districts, holy souls are to be found, virgins consecrated to God who stand in need of a director, whose piety is equal to his learning, and who will loosen their wings instead of clipping them. Under these circumstances, we may justly say that seminaries are an incomparable blessing. They have made our modern clergy the holiest and the purest ever witnessed.

In this virtue and learning the predominating feature is the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Priest, and a holy enthusiasm for their divine vocation. To be

a priest, to continue and extend on earth the mission of Jesus Christ, to have hands that, raised over the sinner, absolved him from his sin, lips which uttered words that pierced the clouds and brought Jesus Christ among us, and a heart whence incessantly flowed consolation, hope, and pardon—oh, how soul-stirring are these thoughts ! It is in preparation for this holy state that for three or four years meditations, holy communions, spiritual lectures, retreats, and all the exercises in the seminary are made. One indeed should have a heart of steel not to be affected and stimulated.

How admirable is the Church in the way she ordains her ministers. Not all at once, but slowly ascending by degrees, as if up those white marble steps leading to the Temple. To-day the ecclesiastical habit and tonsure mark the renunciation of all worldly hopes, and the acceptance of God for the sole portion and eternal inheritance. To-morrow, minor orders bestow upon the ordinands the rights and privileges of the first grade, so looked down upon in the seventeenth century before the institution of seminaries, but so much esteemed since. In some parts, at ordinations, venerable priests, canons, and curés of important parishes might be seen humbly carrying torches, swinging the censers and serving mass. O holy and admirable M. Bourdoise, what would you say if you witnessed so grand a spectacle ?

Next is conferred the sub-diaconate, where, at the threshold of the sanctuary, thrilling with love, the ordinand vows to be for ever Jesus Christ's and His alone. Then the diaconate, when trembling with emotion, he begins to take part in the divine sacrifice, and to touch the sacred vessel containing the blood of Jesus Christ. Lastly the priesthood, when full of joy, amazement, and rapturous delight, it is said, "*Consum-*



*matum est*"—it is consummated. The Creator can do no more for His creature.

No, everything is not conferred all at once. Between each step a preparation is made of three months, six months, or a year. This chalice of love is taken drop by drop, and the draught increasing each time, produces in the soul a holy intoxication. After thirty or forty years of trials and disappointments in the ministry, only five minutes' reflection, fills the heart again with this ever-enduring fervour. The seminaries then are a noble work, and it is not surprising that God should have multiplied saintly founders of them: M. de Bérulle, Père de Gondy, Saint Vincent de Paul, M. Olier, and M. Bourdoise, among whom our heart forbids us to make a distinction.

But it was not sufficient to found seminaries. It was necessary to have priests to carry them on—priests who were willing to renounce everything, to devote themselves entirely to this laborious and hidden work—men of the most eminent virtue and talent, the very sap of the priesthood, but who should be contented to bury themselves in impenetrable obscurity, like those roots that bear and vivify great trees without themselves being seen.

We might expect that such a work should be given to religious, men completely separated from the world, and living in the constant practice of mortification and detachment. Destined, as they are, to be the models of the clergy, to be their directors and fathers, would not the students more readily place confidence in the austere and mortified religious? But there must have been some good reason, as all the founders of seminaries—M. de Bérulle, M. Olier, Saint Vincent de Paul, Père de Condren, and M. Bourdoise—were unanimous in saying that the staff of a seminary should

belong to and be taken from the secular clergy. Saint Vincent when urged to have his disciples religious with solemn vows, absolutely refused. M. Olier wished his followers to be simply called priests of the seminary, not adopting the title Father, and having as a law: "*Nec aliter vivit nisi vita cleri.*" Père de Condren also was very determined on this point. There were to be no solemn vows in these societies, but on that account obedience was all the more stringent. To them all we may apply those eloquent words of Bossuet, "They had no other spirit than the spirit of the Church, no other rules than her canons, no other superiors than her bishops, no other property than her charity, no other solemn vows than those of baptism and priesthood."<sup>1</sup>

We must not discuss here whether Saint Vincent de Paul or M. Olier was the founder of seminaries. We should be discussing merely a trifle, for it was only a matter of six months more on one side or six months less on the other, and the founders themselves do not appear quite agreed on the point.<sup>2</sup> "After the example of the little Society de Vaugirard, the Oratory and the Congregation of the Mission have laboured fervently in the work of seminaries." From this we see M. Olier believed the Sulpicians to be the first. "We are consoled to see that our little work has seemed so good and useful, that others are induced to labour like us, but with more blessings, not only at the missions, but even in seminaries, which are widely extending in France." Here Saint Vincent thinks the contrary. The work was, in fact, the offspring of the time, the

<sup>1</sup> Bossuet, vol. xii. p. 646.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Vincent founded the Seminary for his Congregation in 1637, one in Annecy in 1641, and the Collège des Bons-Enfants in 1642. Saint Sulpice was founded in 1642.

result of the great wave that was then passing over France, stirring every heart and causing each to labour earnestly, without looking around to see what others were doing.

Between them there was no envy, no jealousy. In what terms did Saint Vincent speak of M. Olier ! With what affection he visited him in his last illness, and what respect and veneration did he show at his death ! On the other hand, M. Olier always spoke of M. Vincent as his father, often saying to the ecclesiastics of his seminary : "M. Vincent is our father," and he always manifested great esteem for his signal virtues.

It has been said that the kiss of Saint Dominic and Saint Francis of Assisium has been transmitted from generation to generation on the lips of their posterity. So it is with the posterity of Saint Vincent and M. Olier. Each year, on the feast of Saint Vincent, the children of M. Olier may be seen prostrate before his tomb in the Rue de Sèvres. And if in the inscrutable designs of Providence that day should come which we long for, the day of the canonisation of M. Olier, then too shall be seen kneeling before his tomb the children of Saint Vincent de Paul. The same love, the same gratitude would unite the families of those two great saints, who together have created, or rather revived, the Church of France, by the inestimable blessing of ecclesiastical seminaries.

## CHAPTER IV

### SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL OPPOSES THE FALSE REFORM OF THE CHURCH ATTEMPTED BY JANSENISM—DEATH OF SAINT CHANTAL

1642

WHILE the holy priests of whom we have been speaking, Saint Vincent de Paul, Cardinal de Bérulle, Père de Condren, M. Olier, and M. Bourdoise, without closing their eyes to the evils afflicting the Church, were trying to remedy them (having founded for this end, one the Congregation of the Mission, another the Oratory, and a third the Community of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet), and were uniting in these institutions to revive the ecclesiastical state, there were at the same time other great men, learned doctors, who also saw those evils and deplored them not less keenly; but destitute of lively faith in the indefectibility of the Church, they almost despaired of her cure, and were seeking outside her means of regeneration.

The two principal persons of this second class were : Cornelius Jansenius, and Vergier de Hauranne, Abbé of Saint-Cyran. The first was born in 1585 near Leerdham, in Flanders; the second at Bayonne in 1581. Thus they were almost the same age. They met in Paris in 1605, and became the greatest friends while attending lectures in the Sorbonne, whither they had come to complete their theological studies. They were as alike in disposition as in age. Both were talented, devoted to

study, and having a special taste for learning, both were to gratify it to the full. Again, both were piously inclined, jealous of the honour of the Church, but of a melancholy disposition, looking at the dark side of everything, and criticising men and things with excessive severity. They were inclined, moreover, to novelties. Jansenius was more of a theologian and capable of searching into the depths of dogma; while Saint Cyran was more of a moralist, drawn to solve practical cases and to the direction of souls. The one was a dreamer, the other ever restless and intriguing; the Fleming grave, the Frenchman sprightly; but both imperious and deluding souls by their austerity. Under pretext of reforming the Church they dealt her a blow that would have proved fatal, had she not been divine. It was only after their death that the depth of the wound was seen. When they had completed their studies and prepared their theses for the doctorate, Jansenius might have obtained his in Paris, but like an affectionate son he preferred Louvain. Saint Cyran, however, was obliged to defer his degree, in consequence of the unforeseen rivalry between the Sorbonne and the monastery of the Grands-Augustins. It was at this period that the two friends took an important resolution. Discontented with the course at the Sorbonne, deeming it too superficial and not sufficiently practical, they determined to retire to a country place and devote themselves to the study of primitive Christianity. At this very time Saint Cyran's father died, and his mother recalled him home. At Champré they had a beautiful and extensive place along the coast, where the two friends had ample time, books and leisure to devote themselves entirely to study. They did so with a sort of passion. Jansenius, who was the more delicate, passed his days and almost nights over



Saint Augustine, a study he never relinquished, having read, pen in hand, the eleven folio volumes as many as forty-two times. Saint Cyran's mother became frightened, and told her son that Jansenius would kill himself from study, for neither of them took much sleep. Unfortunately, while they were thus engaged at the difficult study of the Fathers, the two friends were not only alone, without a guide, but their minds were filled with confused ideas. Jansenius had imbibed at Louvain the false doctrine of Baius concerning grace and free-will. Saint Cyran, on his side, had not entirely escaped the semi-Calvinistic influences that were afloat at the Sorbonne, and allowed himself to be persuaded that the Church, especially in her practices, had somewhat lost her primitive purity, and could alone be restored to the beauty which Jesus Christ had given her by going back to the discipline of the first centuries. It was towards those two points that the young priests were to direct their researches. As yet there was nothing definite in their minds. But they thought that the Church had become too human, grace was no longer sufficiently exalted, and the sacred mysteries not sufficiently respected ; that there was a tinge of Pelagianism or almost Arianism abroad ; that people thought too little of God, and too much of man, of his liberty, of his power and his rights ; that they did not realise the gravity of penance, the mysterious and thrilling grandeur of communion and the fewness of the elect. The two friends, therefore, thought that it was necessary to examine all this again in the Fathers, in order to find out the lost doctrine on grace and the sacraments.

In this great undertaking they divided the work. Jansenius, more given to theology, took up the question of grace, the correct idea of which, as he believed, was

lost. He dived into the writings of Saint Augustine to find it, and after a hidden and studious life, left a work in three volumes, into which he had condensed what he believed to be the true doctrine of Saint Augustine, and consequently of the Church, on grace. Saint Cyran, on the other hand, devoted himself to the study of ecclesiastical discipline in the first three or four centuries, concerning penances, confession and holy communion, and likewise wrote several books which were destined to deeply afflict the Church. Although they worked in a certain sense independently, yet, to show their union and mark their sonship of Saint Augustine, because that great man was named *Aurelius Augustinus*, Saint Cyran called his work *Aurelius*, and Jansenius his *Augustinus*.

They were only beginning these studies when events separated them. Jansenius set out for Louvain, and having received his doctorate, was placed at the head of a large college. Ultimately he was made Bishop of Ypres, where he died young, leaving his *Augustinus* unpublished, but with a dedicatory letter in which he submits himself entirely to the authority of the Pope. On his side, Saint Cyran left Bayonne and came to Poitiers, where the Bishop, Mgr. de la Rocheposay, made him Canon and afterwards Abbé of Saint-Cyran, by which name he has since become so celebrated.

Though separated at the very outset, the two friends remained warmly attached. They constantly wrote and communicated to each other the results of their labours, their researches and designs for restoring to the Church her true doctrine and discipline, which, they said, had been neglected or misunderstood. Some fragments of this correspondence show the unsettled state of mind into which Jansenius fell from his reading of Saint Augustine. "If these principles are true, as I judge them

to be from reading a good portion of Saint Augustine, after a while they will astonish the world." And again : "I am still working at Saint Augustine, which I read with the greatest avidity and profit (in my opinion), having now reached the seventh volume, and having read the important books twice or three times. I am more astounded every day at the greatness and depth of his mind, and that his doctrine is so little known among the learned, not only of our own time, but for centuries past. For, to speak plainly, I firmly believe that with the exception of heretics there are none who have corrupted religion more than those babblers of the school you know. If it were to be set up in the old style, which is that of truth, latter-day theology in great part would no longer have the appearance of theology. This makes me greatly admire the wonderful way in which God preserves His spouse from error. I would wish to speak at length, but for that we should require many weeks, perhaps months. Everything I am saying is sufficiently plain from the unchangeable principles ; and though the Jesuits and Jacobins should dispute till the Day of Judgment, as long as they follow the lines they have adopted, they should only go more astray, both the one and the other being a thousand miles from the truth. I shall not presume to tell any one what I think (according to the principles of Saint Augustine) of a great part of the opinions of the present day, especially on grace and predestination, lest I should have to go to Rome, like others, before the whole matter is matured and completed. If I am not permitted to speak, I shall be quite content, at least, to have abandoned the extraordinary opinions that the presumption of these men has introduced. This study has entirely deprived me of the ambition which I might have had for a chair in

the university, for then I should either remain silent or risk speaking, and my conscience would not permit me to speak out. But God will change everything when He thinks fit; this is what I have always told you. I shall tell you more, if God wills that we should meet.”<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact, the two friends met about November 1621, first in Louvain, and probably afterwards in Paris. Prepared now by three years of study, they agreed to slowly and with great secrecy carry out their design of reforming the Church in her doctrine and discipline. It is to this period that the affair of Bourg-Fontaine is assigned. The two friends were said to have joined five or six others of this Carthusian monastery, and united to ruin revealed religion by substituting deism, and even atheism. This is one of those malicious inventions that are to be found everywhere and at all periods of controversy. That Jansenius, the Abbé Saint Cyran and others should have met at Bourg-Fontaine is very possible; that they should have deplored the sad state of the Church and the necessity of regenerating her, nothing is more probable; but that they contemplated suppressing her and substituting atheism, is to say entirely too much. Nobody is less an atheist than Jansenius, and nobody less a naturalist than Saint Cyran. Neither in their writings nor in their conversations, neither in their lives nor in their deaths, is there ever any tendency to deism. On the contrary, they were inclined to the opposite, to religious fanaticism and excessive austerity. They contemplated not the destruction of the Church, but her regeneration according to their false notions. Shortly afterwards they parted, mutually promising to use the greatest discretion; and henceforth, as a matter of fact, their correspondence,

<sup>1</sup> Sainte-Beuve (Port-Royal), vol. i. p. 306.

though much more frequent, was carried on in a secret style only understood by themselves.

While Jansenius, now in Louvain, was absorbed in the study of Saint Augustine and was beginning to write the *Augustinus*, Saint Cyran, who had come to Paris, was skilfully gathering round him a party and insinuating his opinions. Becoming acquainted with M. d'Andilly, he was introduced by him to his sister, Mother Marie-Angélique, the young abbess and reformer of Port-Royal. She brought him to the convent, and placed, alas! her soul, her enthusiasm, her angelic purity and her influence at the service of his detestable doctrines.

While Saint Cyran was thus establishing himself in the Abbey of Port-Royal, he was also making his way into the Oratory, where M. de Bérulle, attracted by his piety, received him with a cordiality he was soon to abuse. He also visited M. Bourdoise, who likewise received him with open arms. Why not receive a man so grave, so humble, so cordial, so friendly to the Church, who assisted on bended knees at benediction, wore the soutane and surplice, and chanted? "If he has peculiar opinions, it is not for Adrien Bourdoise to judge of them; he is not learned, as is well known."

But eminent as were these persons, Saint Cyran saw one greater still, and left no artifice untried in order to reach him. Saint Vincent de Paul was simplicity and uprightness itself—nay, more, charity and benevolence. He suspected no evil, and to convince him of it, it was necessary to prove it twenty times. For his part, Saint Cyran lost no occasion of helping Saint Vincent, and by means of his friends, the first President le Jay, and Advocate-General Bignon, rendered, as a matter of fact, real service to our saint and his Congregation.



Saint Cyran, cautious and dissembling, said little at first about his opinions of the state of the Church and his projected reform. By degrees, however, when he believed he had won over that beautiful soul, so simple and so confiding, he began to speak out. One day the conversation turned on a point of Calvin's doctrine, and he undertook to defend it. "Do you think so, sir?" interrupted Saint Vincent. "Undoubtedly," replied Saint Cyran. "Calvin had not such a bad case, but badly defended it; he meant well, but expressed himself ill." Another day, when Saint Cyran was defending a doctrine condemned by the Council of Trent: "O sir," exclaimed Saint Vincent, "you are going too far; that doctrine has been condemned! What! do you wish me to believe a single fallible doctor like yourself rather than the whole Church, which is the 'pillar of truth'? She teaches me one thing, and you maintain the very opposite. O sir, how can you venture to prefer your own judgment to that of the wisest heads in the world, and of so many holy prelates assembled at the Council of Trent, who have decided this point!"—"The Council of Trent!" sharply replied Saint Cyran with disgust. "Speak to me no more of that Council. It was a council of the Pope and schoolmen, of intrigues and factions."

The saint was profoundly moved by such language; but far from abandoning Saint Cyran, he felt all the more bound to show him affection, in order to be able to intervene and make himself thoroughly acquainted with his views. He therefore continued to see him and showed him the greatest attention. Saint Cyran, mistaking the motives of Saint Vincent's conduct, became bolder. One day while visiting him, Saint Vincent found him in his room absorbed in reading. Not to

interrupt him, the saint remained for a few minutes motionless and in silence. Then Saint Cyran, raising his head and looking towards him, said: "Do you see, M. Vincent, what I am reading? It is the Sacred Scripture. God has given me a perfect understanding of it and great light for its explanation. Hence I shall presume to say that the Sacred Scripture is clearer in my mind than it is in itself."<sup>1</sup>

Another day, Saint Vincent, having said mass at Notre-Dame, thought of paying the Abbé Saint Cyran a visit, as he lived close by. He found him shut up in his library, from which he came out at once, quite excited. "I suspect, sir," said the saint with a winning smile, "you were writing down something that God enlightened you with this morning at prayer."—"Quite true," replied the Abbé, in a transport; "I acknowledge God has given and is giving me great light. He has shown me that the Church no longer exists."—"No longer any Church, sir!"—"No, there is no longer any Church. God has made known to me that she has not been in existence for five or six hundred years. Before that the Church was a mighty river of clear water, but now what seems to be the Church is only mire. The bed of this beautiful river is still the same, but not the water."—"What, sir! will you rather believe your private opinions than the word of our Lord Jesus Christ, who said He would build His Church upon a rock, and that the gates of hell should not prevail against it? The Church is His spouse, and He will never abandon her."—"It is true," said Saint Cyran, "that Jesus Christ has built His Church upon a rock, but there is a time to build and a time to pull down. She was His spouse, but now she is an adulteress, a prostitute, and therefore it is He has

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. ii. p. 240.

repudiated her and wishes that another more faithful to Him should be substituted."—"I beg of you, sir," said the saint sadly, "distrust your own judgment, which suggests sentiments very far removed from the respect we owe to the Church."—"But you yourself, sir," sharply retorted Saint Cyran, "do you know precisely what the Church is?"—"The Church, sir, as we learned when children, in the catechism, is the congregation of all the faithful under the guidance of the Pope and legitimate pastors."—"Tut, tut! you only know high Dutch."—"But, sir, this is the language of the Church herself."—"You are an utter ignoramus, and instead of being at the head of your Congregation, you deserve to be driven out of it altogether; I am only surprised that you are tolerated at all."—"Alas! sir, I am more surprised than you, for I am even more ignorant than you say, and if they did me justice they would not fail to send me away."<sup>1</sup>

What a beautiful conversation! See here the soul of Saint Vincent de Paul, the strength of his faith, the depth of his humility. Never was Saint Cyran better unmasked. Saint Vincent returned dumfounded, but without feeling that he should abandon such a soul—rather determined to save it. Learning that Saint Cyran was about to leave Paris for his abbey, he resolved to make a great effort to enlighten him. Having disposed him to receive advice, Saint Vincent spoke of their obligation to obey the Church and to respect the decisions of the Council of Trent. Then taking up the propositions previously supported by Saint Cyran, and already alluded to, he showed him that they were contrary to Catholic doctrine. "You are lost," said he in conclusion, "if you entangle yourself further in this

<sup>1</sup> Maynard.

labyrinth of error. At any rate, you will go alone, or at least neither my Congregation nor myself will follow you." Led on by his zeal and charity, the saint became more and more animated, and towards the end of the interview, spoke with such force and persuasiveness, that Saint Cyran stood silent, not having a word to say.

Having reached his abbey in Poitou, Saint Cyran thought he should make some reply, and wrote a long and intentionally obscure letter, gliding over, without explanation, the points to which Saint Vincent had objected, and trying to regain his friendship by reminding him of all the services which he had done him.

This crooked way of insinuating his doctrine, then disavowing it, first advancing, then withdrawing, Saint Cyran adopted not only before Saint Vincent, but before eminent persons, so much so that it was noised through Paris and reached even Richelieu, who, anxious for peace in the Church as well as in the State, began to feel uneasy and to watch more closely.

In 1632 a large volume written in Latin appeared, and was entitled *Aurelius*. It was Saint Cyran's; but far from putting his name to it, he disowned it and enveloped it in such a mystery, that he could never be shown to be its author. The teaching in it was not sound. It misrepresented the true constitution of the Church, by exalting the power of bishops, and placing them almost on a level with the Pope. On the other hand, priests were made the equals of bishops. The Church was no longer a monarchy, it was a republic, the divine character of which was lost in the course of ages. As regarded morals and discipline, the errors were no less grave. It was wrong, says the author, to abolish public penance, and it must be restored. The power to absolve was exaggerated. Absolution should

only be given after the penance had been performed, and it was the latter with repentance that remitted sins, rather than the absolution, which did little more than declare them remitted. In fine, it was a perversion of the true doctrine of the Church to allow sinners so easily and frequently to the holy table. Communion is an awful mystery, very few are worthy of approaching it, and then only after long preparation.

These doctrines, some contained in the *Aurelius*, others in the discourses of Saint Cyran and his adherents, were no longer mere theories. They were put in practice. At Port-Royal, for example, Mother Agnes kept the sisters and children fifteen months from confession. She did not feel it the slightest to be deprived of the sacraments, and would have passed her life without feeling it. Mother Angélique herself allowed five months to pass, and once even Easter Sunday, without communicating. At Saint-Merri, the curé, M. du Hamel, had re-established public penances, and divided the penitents into four classes. Those guilty only of secret sins comprised the first, who assisted together at the office near the end of the church, and separated from the other parishioners by four paces. The second class were those who had quarrelled with their neighbours, but without scandal, and they were placed outside the church under the vestibule. Thirdly, there were those who had committed some scandalous sin, and they were placed in the cemetery. Lastly, hardened sinners were on a little hill, from which they could see the entrance of the church. All the penitents were to remain barefooted and bareheaded during the office, and moreover, add other mortifications, such as fasting, public disciplining and hair shirts.<sup>1</sup> Even in some

<sup>1</sup> Faillon, vol. ii. p. 245.



churches public scourgings were established, and great disorders were to be feared.

Worn out with all this agitation, Richelieu determined to put an end to it with one stroke. He had the Abbé Saint Cyran arrested by night and confined in the prison at Vincennes. The people of Paris becoming indignant at such arbitrariness, when the murmurs reached the Cardinal, he remarked, "If Luther and Calvin had been treated similarly, we should not have seen the world on fire."

Richelieu, however, did not succeed here. The arrest only magnified Saint Cyran and threw an aureola of fame around him ; while at the same time his papers, which had been seized, read, and discussed, put an end to the secrecy that had hitherto prevailed.

All Paris was talking of the arrest, and a thousand reports were spread. Merely to mention Saint Vincent as an instance, it was said, but without any foundation, that the very evening of the arrest, the saint visited Saint Cyran's nephew, M. Barcos, and expressed his deep regret. It was also reported that he had a confidential letter sent to the prisoner, warning him to be very guarded in his replies, and to give them only in writing, lest he might be made to say something that he did not intend. M. Molé was also said to have warned Saint Cyran to leave no margin, but to fill the pages, lest something might be added ; "for," said he, "he has to deal with odd people."<sup>1</sup>

Again, it was rumoured that Richelieu, knowing the intimate relations between Saint Vincent and Saint Cyran, had sent for our saint and endeavoured to make him speak, but that the latter maintained a prudent silence which irritated the Cardinal, who summarily

<sup>1</sup> Sainte-Beuve.

dismissed him, scratching his head, as he usually did when annoyed.

It was at this time that God had prepared for our saint a consolation of inestimable value. This was the arrival in Paris of the venerable Mother de Chantal, who, now in her sixty-ninth and last year, foundress of eighty-six houses, had come to bid a last farewell to her daughters in Paris. Thus Saint Vincent again met that admirable woman, whose son he claimed to be, whom he called his mother, his only mother, and whom he venerated with a filial affection. "O my dear mother," he wrote, "permit me to have the happiness of enjoying still a place in your amiable heart!" And again: "Oh, what affection God gives me for my dear mother, whom I love most affectionately!" Although she was only four years older, and he had been her confessor and director in Paris, he considered himself her son. He revered her for her incomparable virtues, her natural gifts, which were so exalted and so exceptionally united in the same person. He found in her "an upright spirit, but prudent, mild, yet resolute to an eminent degree." He envied her activity. "O my mother, ask of God for me," he wrote, "the virtue of diligence in His service, a virtue which He has so abundantly bestowed upon you!" He admired her firmness united to so much sweetness. "I shall endeavour to obey you with regard to the house in the Faubourg, and to do as you desire, if you implore God to give me a share of that firmness which He has joined to your sweetness." He had absolute confidence in her judgment, submitting to her his plans and undertakings, and humbly asking her advice, even in matters intimately connected with his Congregation. He explained to her with not less openness the im-

provements which he wished to see in hers, but with what humility ! Saint Vincent desired to have a visitor-general for all the houses of the Visitation, but Saint Chantal would not consent. "O God," he wrote, "how completely I submit my will and judgment, not doubting that it is the will of God, since it is that of my worthy mother, my most deserving mother, my only mother, whom, after our Lord, I honour and love more tenderly than any child ever did his !" But nothing equals the incomparable testimony he rendered to her shortly afterwards, when he declares that he had been acquainted with her for more than twenty years, that he had always found her excelling in all virtues, in humility, mortification, obedience, zeal, love of God, and that during all that time he had never remarked in her any imperfection.<sup>1</sup>

The admiration Saint Vincent had for Saint Chantal was reciprocated. She thanked God every day for having granted her daughters in Paris such a director. She thought herself unworthy to be his daughter. She opened to him her heart and her conscience with the simplicity of a child, and great was her joy to think that now, being on the brink of the grave, she should see once more in Paris the saintly director of her soul. O happy moments when two souls, penetrated with the love of God, reflected on each other the rays of the Divine Sun that consumed them ! What respect ! What holy admiration ! How consoling it must have been for Saint Chantal to lay open her soul to her holy director before presenting it to the Sovereign Judge. What joy for Saint Vincent to contemplate that humility, simplicity and uprightness ; but what a contrast with the spectacle of artifice and duplicity presented by Saint Cyran, Mother Angélique, and rising Jansenism !

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. i. p. 385.

In order to understand the relations which existed between Saint Vincent and Saint Chantal, it should be remembered that in the year 1619, when the Order of the Visitation had just been established in Paris, Saint Francis de Sales, wishing to entrust the direction of his daughters to a priest endowed with all the qualities requisite for so important a ministry, chose Saint Vincent de Paul. He was then little known in Paris and filled no important charge; but the holy Bishop, with that discernment for which he was remarkable, had recognised him as that man of God, that director, whose portrait he had drawn in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Saint Vincent held this office till his death, that is to say, for forty years. Saint Chantal came from time to time to Paris and thus had opportunities of meeting him. She conversed intimately with him both about the affairs of her soul and of her institute. Since the death of Saint Francis de Sales she had given him her entire confidence, keeping up an uninterrupted correspondence with him, in which one must admire the mutual respect and the pious esteem those two great souls had for each other. We must not be astonished, therefore, at the vision we are about to relate, the account of which is in the words of Saint Vincent himself. Saint Vincent was anxious to retain her in Paris. The winter was approaching, and November had begun bleak and cold, so he feared the journey should prove fatal. But Mother de Chantal had accomplished the object of her visit; why then remain longer? Hence she started on November 11, and a month later, as Saint Vincent foresaw, she died at Moulins, in the arms of Mme. de Montmorency, on December 13, 1641.

The moment Saint Vincent received intelligence of

her immediate danger, he knelt down to pray for her, and then it was he had the vision of the two globes, which we must hear from his own mouth. He wrote it to the Daughters of the Visitation to console them in their great affliction. After the most superlative praise, the more worthy of notice coming from one usually so reserved, he continues :

“I have no doubt that God will one day manifest the holiness of Mother de Chantal, as I understand He has already done in many places and ways, one of which happened to a person worthy of credence, who, I assure you, would prefer to die rather than tell a lie.” (The saint was speaking of himself.)

“This person, on getting news of her extreme danger, placed himself on his knees to pray for her. Immediately he saw a small globe as of fire, which ascending, united with a second, and then joined a third, larger and more luminous than the others. He was interiorly enlightened that the first globe was the soul of Mother de Chantal, the second that of Saint Francis de Sales, and the third the Divine Essence. The soul of this worthy mother was united with that of their holy Founder and both with God, their sovereign Lord.”

“Moreover the same person, who is a priest, offering the adorable sacrifice for the deceased immediately after her death, and being at the memento for the dead, thought of praying for her, as she might be atoning for some words she had spoken, which seemed to be a venial fault, and then again he had a similar vision of the same globes and their union. An interior conviction told him that this soul was happy and did not require prayers, and so convinced was the priest of this, that he seemed to see her in that state every time he thought of her.

“What might raise a doubt as regards this vision,”



adds Saint Vincent, "is, that this person had such esteem for the holiness of Mother de Chantal that he could never read her letters without weeping, feeling that it was God alone who could inspire such sentiments. Consequently this vision might be the work of his imagination. But what led him to think it was a true vision was that he is not accustomed to have visions and never had any but this. In testimony of which I have signed and sealed the present document."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. i. p. 384.

## CHAPTER V

SAINT VINCENT'S OPPOSITION TO JANSENISM (*continued*)

1643

IN the midst of all this, Richelieu died on December 4, 1642. The immediate consequence of his death was Saint Cyran's release. Even before the investigation was finished and the verdict arrived at, Louis XIII. had wished him to be set at liberty. But the inflexible Cardinal opposed it, saying such dangerous characters should always be kept in check. Hence Saint Cyran was detained in Vincennes, but in a comparatively easy confinement, receiving visits from the most distinguished people, to whom he taught his doctrine; writing letters in abundance, and feasting on the reading of the *Augustinus*. This book had just appeared, and here and there he found many things to be toned down, but yet he said that after Saint Paul and Saint Augustine a third could not be mentioned who spoke more divinely on grace. Thus he was secretly training his disciples, particularly Arnault, who was becoming more and more important, and on the death of Jansenius considered himself the leader of the party. But all these facts, as history now reveals, were then buried in obscurity, so much so that Saint Cyran's release was looked upon by many as reparation for an injustice.

Saint Cyran did not long enjoy his liberty. He died two months after from apoplexy, which carried him off in a day. His obsequies were very solemn, attended by

many archbishops, bishops, and a large number of distinguished laity. Was Saint Vincent present? Did he sprinkle the holy water over the remains? It is warmly disputed, but we see no reason why he should not have gone. Saint Cyran was not condemned, and if he had peculiar opinions, he had not made them public, and died in exterior communion with the Church. Bishops, princes and men of rank were present. If it were at all possible for Saint Vincent he was bound to be there; his faith did not forbid him and his heart urged him.

But if Saint Vincent was so kind in his manner, he was inflexible when there was question of doctrine. Never, even when most intimate with Saint Cyran, could he listen without a shudder to the least word that might wound his faith, however slightly. "Do you know, sir," he wrote to a priest of his Congregation, "this new error of Jansenism is one of the most dangerous that has ever troubled the Church. I am very specially bound to praise and thank God that the leaders of this doctrine, with whom I was well acquainted, were unable to convince me. I cannot tell you the pains they took and the arguments they used to win me, but I opposed them, among other things, with the authority of the Council of Trent, which is manifestly against them; and when I saw they still held out, instead of arguing, I quietly repeated my Credo, and thus have remained firm in the faith."<sup>1</sup>

What already his instinct caused him to dislike, his reason forced him to reject when instead of murmuring and insinuating talk, the sense of which might be misunderstood, he had under his eyes the two great works into which the Jansenists had condensed their double error. The first, written by Jansenius, Bishop of Ypres,

<sup>1</sup> Sainte-Beuve.

and entitled *Augustinus*, had appeared in 1640. But this book, written in Latin, on the most obscure points of the doctrine of grace, required time to reach France, and in 1643 it had not provoked much comment. The second was entitled *On Frequent Communion*, which might be more properly styled *Against Frequent Communion*, written in French, and although somewhat heavy, was easier to understand, and became the talk of learned men as well as of fashionable ladies. It was certainly inspired by Saint Cyran, much of it written by him, and appeared only two months before his death, August 1643. But he was unwilling to put his name to it, and had it signed by the most learned of his adherents, Antoine Arnault. It was the latter work that Saint Vincent read first, and he was horror-stricken. How can anybody think that it is necessary to defend Saint Vincent against the accusations of the Jansenists who tried to win him? His heart alone is sufficient to defend him. His idea of God, so good, so tender, so loving, so merciful, so willing to pardon, is irreconcilable with the harsh doctrines of Jansenism. Saint Cyran said, "God is terrible;" Saint Vincent, "God is good." Saint Cyran, "God did not die for all men;" Saint Vincent, "He died for all, and had it been necessary He would have died for each one in particular." Saint Cyran said, "Communion is a terrible mystery and hardly anybody worthy to approach it;" but Saint Vincent, "Communion is so holy, that undoubtedly nobody is worthy of approaching; but it is also so sweet, so amiable, such a masterpiece of infinite love, that nobody can approach too frequently." That is Saint Vincent de Paul. Oh no! he was not, he could not be a Jansenist. He had not, he could not have anything but a horror of such a doctrine. He was kind and affectionate

in the beginning to Saint Cyran ; then grieved but prudent, he knew more than he wished to disclose ; ever hopeful, and never wishing to condemn him whom the Church had not condemned. He attended, perhaps, Saint Cyran's obsequies to cover everything with charity ; but once the Church had spoken, once Jansenism had been unmasked, then he was as determined and as energetic against its doctrines as he had been gentle and patient with its advocates. Behold Saint Vincent de Paul.

With what exquisite tact and admirable common-sense he marks each page of the book entitled *Frequent Communion* ! What zeal in defending piety, in maintaining the frequentation of the sacraments ! To those who put forward the teaching of this book as a reason for not approaching holy communion, he said : " It is true that there are only too many who abuse this divine sacrament—especially myself, wretch that I am, more than anybody. I beg of you to assist me in asking pardon of God. But the reading of this book, instead of attracting men to frequent communion, only repels them. No longer is witnessed, even at Easter, the concourse of people going to communion that used to be. Many curés in Paris deplore having far less communicants than hitherto. Saint-Sulpice had three thousand less. The curé of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet told us lately that, on a visitation of his parish after Easter, he discovered fifteen hundred parishioners who had not gone to communion, and it was the same in other places. Few now went on the first Sundays and great feasts."

To others who boasted of the good effect the reading of the *Frequent Communion* produced, he said : " It may be true that some persons in France and Italy have derived advantage from this book, but for the hundred



who perhaps have profited in Paris and become more respectful in the use of the sacraments, there are at least ten thousand whom it has injured by keeping them away altogether." He dwelt on this main point, and proved it. "As to alleging that this book deters people from approaching the sacraments, I tell you it is quite true, and although it pretends not, in order the better to attain its end, yet it urgently dissuades people from going to confession and communion. As a matter of fact, does it not highly commend, on page 36 of the Preface, the piety of those who through humility would defer their communion till the end of their lives? Does it not contend that God is better pleased by that humility than by all kinds of good works? Is it not said, in chapter ii. of Part iii., that it is to speak unworthily of the King of Heaven to say that He is honoured by our communion, and that Jesus Christ can receive only shame and outrage from frequent communicants? As far as I am concerned, I frankly confess that if I thought as much of M. Arnault's book as you do, not only would I renounce for ever mass and holy communion through the spirit of humility, but I would even abhor the sacrament, if it were what he represents it to be in the case of those who communicate in the dispositions required by the Church, namely, a snare of Satan and a poison that kills souls." The saint adds, with a flash of irony and indignation: "Were we to close our eyes to everything else except what he says in many places of the admirable dispositions without which he would not have us communicate, will any one be found who is so confident of his virtue as to believe that he is fit to communicate worthily? This degree of perfection belongs only to M. Arnault, who, having laid down dispositions so excellent that even a Saint Paul would not have ventured

to communicate, nevertheless boasts several times in his apology that he himself says mass every day. In that his humility is as admirable as his charity towards those wise directors who are the ordinary objects of his abuse. To conclude, in my humble opinion, it is heresy to say that to wish to defer communicating till near death is a great act of virtue, for the Church commands us to communicate at least every year."

If persons could no longer approach holy communion since the requisite dispositions were so perfect, how could priests say mass? Mass should be abolished, as Saint Vincent was forced to remark, thus: "Just as this author estranges people from communion, he will not be concerned at the churches remaining without mass, since he makes no scruple of applying all those admirable effects which Ven. Bede declares attached to the celebration of the holy sacrifice, to abstaining from offering it through a spirit of penance. This may be seen in chapter xl. of Part iii., where he makes even more of this penance than of the sacrifice of the mass. Now is it not evident that such language strongly tends to make priests neglect offering the holy mass, since they gain as much by not saying mass as by saying it, and even, according to M. Arnault, they gain more? For in praising those who seldom go to communion, he must esteem it much more meritorious to abstain from saying mass."

At the same time that Saint Vincent was energetically striving to maintain the custom of frequent communion, he was also strongly opposing the so-called restoration of public penances. They only served to deter people from confession, in placing an interval of four or five months between confession and absolution, under pretext that the latter could only be received with perfect

contrition. "It is true," says Saint Vincent, "that Saint Charles Borromeo has stirred up the spirit of penance in his diocese, but not so as to withdraw people from confession and holy communion, except in the case prescribed by the canons, which we try to put in practice in proximate occasions, enmities, and public sins. But this is very different from saying that he ordained public penances for secret sins, and the performance of the satisfaction before receiving absolution, as the book in question requires. Never do we see him inflicting public penance or deferring holy communion for every kind of mortal sin, nor desiring to have an interval of three or four months between confession and absolution, like those so-called reformers who frequently do so for ordinary sins. Hence, although absolution may be too freely given to all kinds of sinners, which Saint Charles deplores, it does not follow that he approved of the extremities to which M. Arnault goes, since they are diametrically opposed to a number of regulations the saint lays down."

And when it was objected that this practice of penance, and even of public penance before absolution, went back to Apostolic times, and that the Church could not interfere without ceasing to be the pillar of truth, Saint Vincent said: "The Church never changes as to her faith, but may she not change as to her discipline? Has not God, who is immutable in Himself, changed His action with regard to men? Have not our Lord and the Apostles done so? How then does this man say that the Church should err if she did not embrace those penances practised in the past? Is this orthodox?"

If our saint was so moved by reading Arnault's *Frequent Communion*, he was still more so when he began to study the *Augustinus* of Jansenius. The

*Frequent Communion*, it is true, only touched on some of the most necessary practices of our religion, but the *Augustinus*, on the contrary, attacked its very constitution. A controversy arose about this book, in which not only theologians took part, but men of the world, for it was the talk in the salons as well as in the universities. The letters of Mme. de Sevigné re-echo this strife.

To secure that their efforts might not be spent in vain, Nicolas Cornet, a doctor of theology, Bossuet's tutor, "a man of long-standing distinction, simplicity and probity," condensed the large volume into five propositions, "which are," says Bossuet, "the soul of the work—the book itself, in fact." Let us hear Bossuet in his funeral oration of Nicolas Cornet, as he takes occasion to exhibit his own master mind on this whole affair of Jansenism. With one word he sheds a light upon this dark question. "In our time," he says, "two dangerous maladies have afflicted the Church. Some doctors have adopted an unfortunate and unwise indulgence, a fatal compassion which makes them too lenient towards sinners. Others, not less extreme, have subjected souls to the most unjust rigorism, not tolerating any weakness whatever. Through excess they have destroyed the spirit of piety, everywhere making out new crimes and overwhelming human weakness by adding to the yoke God has imposed upon us. Who does not see that such rigour fans presumption, fosters disregard, feeds a haughty discontent and an ostentatious singularity, paints virtue too severe, the Gospel too exacting, and Christianity impossible?"<sup>1</sup>

Haughty discontent, ostentatious singularity, a rigor-

<sup>1</sup> Bossuet

ism that fosters disregard—how truly is this Saint Cyran and his school.

Bossuet continues : “ The climax of this new tempest occurred while Cornet was Syndic of the Theological Faculty. Seeing the winds rise, the clouds gather, and the storm become worse and worse, wise and calm as he was, he set about attentively considering this new doctrine and its supporters. He saw that Saint Augustine, whom he looked upon as the most enlightened and the most profound of all the doctors, had left to the Church a most holy and Apostolic exposition of the doctrine of grace. He also saw that either through the natural weakness of the human intellect, or because of the depth and delicacy of the questions involved, or rather in consequence of the condition necessary and inseparable from our faith during this night of darkness and obscurity, this celestial doctrine is surrounded with impenetrable difficulties. So true indeed is this, that there was danger lest conclusions ruinous to human liberty might be insensibly deduced. Then he considered with how much reason the various schools of theologians and the entire Church laboured to prevent such false inferences. On the other hand, he saw that these new doctors were so enamoured with them, that in place of rejecting them they adopted them as their own. Most of these conclusions, which all theologians had ever regarded as difficult objections, to meet which a clear understanding of the doctrine of Saint Augustine and the Church was essential, the new doctors regarded, on the contrary, as acquisitions necessary to be preserved, and what seemed to everybody else a rock that threatened shipwreck, to them seemed the safest port to make for.”

In fine, Bossuet, great man as he was, does not try to depreciate the leaders of Jansenism. “ Our wise and



cautious Syndic," he continues, "judged that those of whom we have been speaking might be described almost as follows: they were distinguished, eloquent, daring, determined, intelligent and strong-minded men, but more capable of destroying than building up, and more inclined to confuse Christian truths than to reduce them to their natural unity. However, minds became agitated, and things more and more entangled. This industrious and powerful party attracted at least, if it did not completely captivate, the youth and talent of the schools."

How well and how beautifully all this is expressed, while at the same time what a quiet and passing light it sheds over the grave benches of the Sorbonne. Going deeper, Bossuet praises the epitome (the five propositions), and refers to it as a "true quintessence." Nobody was better made up than Cornet on the vital point of this question. He understood thoroughly the differences between the various opinions of the schools, how far they agree and where they begin to differ. It is this experience, this exquisite knowledge, this combination of the best lights of the Sorbonne, that has given us this epitome. The propositions separate truth from error, and are, so to speak, the pith of the new opinions, the touchstone by which all may reject them."

Denounced to the Sorbonne in July 1649, these five propositions were referred to Rome in a letter signed by nearly eighty-five bishops. Our saint worked hard to obtain these signatures. He wrote on all sides, and even got Anne of Austria to apply to the Pope to hasten the definition of faith on the point. "I have made my prayer," he said, "for three months on the doctrine of grace, and God, by new lights every day, has confirmed me in the belief that our Lord died for all, and

that He wished to save every one." And so, too, as regards the question of grace being given to all and sufficient for all: "Truly I cannot understand how a God, so infinitely good, who every day stretches forth His hands to embrace sinners, *expandi manus meas quotidie*, could have the heart to refuse grace to all those who ask it, and allow Himself to be excelled in goodness by David, who sought among his enemies some one to whom he might be merciful."

It is thus Saint Vincent discovers in his own heart, in the intuitions of his spiritual life, the true answer to the cruel sophisms of this heresy.

While Saint Vincent was collecting the signatures for the letter to be forwarded to the Pope denouncing the five propositions, he was uniting with M. Olier and M. Bretonvilliers, to send theologians to Rome to show the danger to which these propositions were exposing the Church of France. The Jansenists had already sent others, especially Père des Mares, the celebrated Oratorian. It is not our business to recount the endless discussions which then took place; the meetings of the special congregations appointed by the Pope, and at ten or twelve of which, each lasting for three or four hours, Innocent X. thought it his duty to be present; or the last and solemn sitting, at which Père des Mares spoke for four hours before the Pope; and the innumerable other conferences of a similar kind, until at last, on June 9, 1653, Innocent X., having recommended himself to God in prayer, summoned one of his secretaries and dictated the Bull *Cum occasione*. The same evening it was promulgated in Rome, and immediately forwarded to France.

The joy of Saint Vincent when the Bull arrived was profound. He immediately wrote to Mgr. Alain de Solminihac, Bishop of Cahors: "My lord, I am send-

ing you most agreeable news—the condemnation of the Jansenists, their five propositions having been declared heretical on June 9. The Bull was published the same day in Rome, and reached Paris on the feast of Saint Peter. Their Majesties received it very warmly, and his Eminence is about to put it in force. All Paris is rejoicing, at least those better disposed, and the others declare their willingness to submit. M. Singlin, who, with M. Arnault, is one of the leaders, has acknowledged that the Holy See must be obeyed, and M. Hamel, curé of Saint-Merri, one of the foremost, is in like dispositions and ready to publish the Bull in his church. Many of the others, as M. and Mme. de Liancourt, declare they are no longer what they were. In a word, it is expected that all will acquiesce. Not, indeed, that some did not find it difficult to submit, saying that although the opinions of Jansenius are condemned, theirs are not. I only heard this from one person. So great a blessing, my lord, is this decision, that everybody here rejoices, and those who saw the evil that the strife was causing cannot feel sufficiently grateful.”<sup>1</sup>

At the same time he went to Port-Royal, having been told that the recluses, the disciples of Saint Cyran, had resolved to fully submit to the Bull. He spent several hours with them, tenderly congratulated them on their obedience to the Holy See, and showed them every mark of esteem, affection and confidence. Alas ! that absolute submission to the Pope was destined to last but a day.

We may well conclude that a man so zealous to shield from error both the sheep and their shepherds was ever watchful over his own Congregation and each of its members. “O Jesus,” he would say, “it is not

“Letters,” vol. i. p. 554.

expedient for us to maintain different opinions in the little Company ; we must always be of one mind, otherwise we shall be torn asunder among ourselves ! And the remedy is to submit to the Superior's opinion. I say it is not to the superior that we submit, but to God, to the Popes, the councils, the saints ; and should any one be unwilling to do so, it will be best for him to leave, and that is what the Company wishes. Many orders in the Church afford us this example. The Discalced Carmelites, in their chapter last year, ordained that their professors of theology should teach the long-established opinions of the Church and oppose novelties. Every one knows that the Jesuits act likewise, while the Congregation of Saint Geneviève follows the opinions of Saint Augustine, which we do too, explaining, however, Saint Augustine by the Council of Trent, and not the Council of Trent by Saint Augustine, for the first is infallible, the second is not." One day he was asked what should be done to moderate the harshness towards the Port-Royal party. "Why drive them to extremities ? Would it not be better to come to an agreement ? They are disposed for it if treated with more moderation, and there is no one better suited than you to soften the irritation on both sides, and to effect a complete reconciliation." —"Sir," Saint Vincent merely replied, "when a decision is given, there is nothing to be done but submit to it. What union can we make with them if they have not an honest and sincere intention of submitting ? How can we modify what the Church has decided ? It is a matter of faith, which cannot be altered or tampered with, and consequently we cannot accommodate it to suit their sentiments. It is for them to submit their private judgment, and confidently unite with us by a true and sincere submission to the head of the Church.

Without that, sir, the only thing we can do is to pray for their conversion."

It was by such vigour of thought, such force of expression, such ardour and firmness of doctrine, that Saint Vincent preserved his Congregation from all taint of Jansenism. How admirable ! Of the three Congregations seemingly raised up by God for the education of the French clergy, the first was unwillingly and in a mysterious manner led away from this employment, and alone was affected by Jansenism. The other two, that of Saint Vincent de Paul and that of M. Olier, remained absolutely exempt. Free from all error, as deeply conscious as the Abbé Saint Cyran of the divinity of our Lord, of the grace of His priesthood, of the holiness necessary for priests, but without his exaggerations or excesses, they began to form that great clergy of France which was the wonder of the second half of the seventeenth century, which traversed the wretched and impure eighteenth with little loss, and was still fresh and vigorous enough in 1793 to yield confessors and martyrs, and after exile and persecution, to win the reputation of being the holiest, the purest and the grandest of any clergy.

But even this is not all that Saint Vincent did for the regeneration of the priesthood. We have seen him establish the exercises for the ordinands, the Tuesday Conferences, successfully found ecclesiastical seminaries, skilfully guard the clergy from the blighting doctrine of Jansenism, which would have destroyed their zeal; let us wait a few years more and we shall behold this humble priest enter the Louvre, the palace of kings, take his seat in the Council of Conscience, become its president, and use all his influence to give to the Church holy bishops, without whom the reform of the clergy had been ephemeral and the regeneration of France impossible.



## CHAPTER VI

DEATH OF LOUIS XIII.—ANNE OF AUSTRIA CALLS SAINT  
VINCENT DE PAUL TO THE COUNCIL OF CONSCIENCE  
—HIS EFFORTS TO HAVE GOOD BISHOPS APPOINTED

1643-1653

FIVE months after Richelieu, Louis XIII. died on May 14, 1643, at the age of forty-two. Fifteen days before, he had summoned Saint Vincent to assist him to make a holy end. Not that there was not around him all the spiritual succour he might desire—Père Birret, his ordinary confessor ; Mgr. Séguier, Bishop of Meaux, his first chaplain ; and Mgr. Cospéan, Bishop of Lisieux, his second chaplain. But he had so often heard of the holiness of Saint Vincent, of his love for the poor, of his efforts for the sanctification of the clergy, and of his great works of charity, that he wished to see him and have his assistance in the hour of death. “The deplorable state of his health warned him that the end was approaching. He saw it with the courage of a hero and the resignation and confidence of a just man, who, wearing a crown, had lived for God alone, detached from grandeurs, pleasures and even from himself. He was a man who from his labours and trials had always endeavoured to lay up treasures which neither rust nor moth can consume, who had not to deplore pleasures, extravagance, much less war ; in fine, who in all his administration had looked only to God and duty. Still his sins—for who, even among the just, have not something with

which to reproach themselves?—his humility, and the terrible judgments of God, kept him in an abasement and holy fear, which, without disturbing his humble confidence, obtained for him more and more of the mercy, grace, and light of which he stood in need. He was very far from thinking well of himself, knowing that it is written, ‘He that is just, let him be justified still.’ It was to this object he consecrated the remainder of his life, to profit by everything, to increase more and more his interior penance.”<sup>1</sup>

Such a king deserved to be assisted in his last moments by a saint, and towards the end of April 1643, fifteen days before his death, he sent for Saint Vincent.

Our humble priest was greatly surprised on receiving such an invitation. He had never seen the King, scarcely met the Queen, and had only some passing relations with Richelieu. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate. There was question of a soul, and as he would have gone to the galleys to save a dying slave, he hastened now to Saint-Germain-en-Laye, to the death-bed of Louis XIII.

The saint’s entrance into the chamber of death had a religious dignity and gravity that became the situation. On the threshold he saluted the King with the words, “Sire, *timenti Deum bene erit in extremis.*” To which the King, deeply read in Sacred Scripture, replied by finishing the verse, “*Et in die defunctionis suæ benedicetur.*” Then began those interviews of which the dying man kept the secret, and which the humility of the saint buried in the silence of the grave. A single word, however, has transpired which shows the nature of these visits. The saint spoke to the King of the obligations and terrible responsibility of royalty, placing in the first rank the nomination of bishops. “O M. Vincent!” replied the King, “if

<sup>1</sup> Saint-Simon.

I were restored to health, I should nominate no bishop who had not spent three years with you."

At this first visit Saint Vincent remained about eight days, constantly in attendance on the King, exciting in him those sentiments of faith, courage, and resignation to the holy will of God, which were to mark so noble a death.

After eight days an improvement which often precedes death appeared, and Saint Vincent thought he might leave for Paris, where important matters awaited him. He remained in Paris till 11th May, when suddenly the malady became decidedly worse, and death was only three days off. Again the King summoned him, and requested him to remain to the end, which he did.

These last three days were most memorable. At the same time that Louis XIII. was preparing himself to die as a Christian, he was also preparing himself to die as a King, by taking every means to secure the peace and prosperity of France. The future was not without its clouds. His successor was a child of four, entrusted to two guardians in whom he had little confidence. The first was his wife, Anne of Austria, whom he knew to be feeble, fickle, and inclined to Spanish interests, easily led, and constantly changing her counsellors. The second was his brother, Gaston d'Orleans, dissipated, ambitious, irresolute, destitute of any kind of courage, and possessed of very little sense and discernment. He was ever ready to quarrel, still more so to repent, and at that time the least suited to counsel, support, direct and govern a kingdom. It is true that Richelieu when dying recommended Mazarin; but he was only five months in office, and although already giving proofs of his capacity, it was as yet little anticipated what part he was to play

in the government of the kingdom. The King, who hardly knew him, was not anxious to make him Prime Minister in place of Richelieu.

The outcome of these reflections was the will Louis XIII. dictated to Chavigny, Minister and Secretary of State, in which Louis nominated the Queen as Regent, and his brother Gaston, Lieutenant-General of the kingdom under her. It was impossible for him to do otherwise ; but he added the Prince de Condé as President of the Council, and all the ministers then in office were to be irremovable members. By this counterpoise he hoped to leave behind him a wise and solid government.

“Having taken this fundamental precaution, he judged it prudent to add another, in order to make this testament as solid as possible. He summoned to his presence all the distinguished persons then at court. The Queen and his brother Gaston were there, and the King ordered the First President at the head of a large deputation from Parliament to enter.

“From his deathbed he addressed them in a speech full of piety, dignity and wisdom, and in presence of the Queen and his brother, explained how he wished the kingdom to be governed until his son reached his majority. He recommended them both to the fidelity of so many illustrious witnesses with an animation that had a striking effect on all. Then leaning back, he astonished and moved them still more by his prudent mingling of courage and tenderness, humility and dignity. They stood listening in admiration to a discourse at once wise, far-seeing and temperate, and delivered, too, with such force and clearness by a dying man on a bed of suffering. He treated his approaching death with the same simplicity and indifference as he should another's. At last, he commanded

Chavigny to read his will aloud, slowly and distinctly, that everybody might understand what it contained. This over, the King asked their opinions, and ordered each one to speak freely. It was approved of unanimously. Then he commanded Chavigny to hand the testament to the First President and other deputies, to register it as a law, since all approved of it. Finally, he dismissed them with every manifestation of tenderness, confidence and dignity, reminding them of the fidelity they had pledged to his successor and to the State. Exhausted as he was, he retained, however, some of the Huguenot lords, whom he exhorted with the affection of a father and a friend, and as a man about to appear before his God, to reflect seriously, calmly and without prejudice, and to return to the bosom of the Church, outside of which there was no salvation. He spoke, too, to some Catholic lords about their disorders and of the importance of being converted in time. And now that those important and final duties had been fulfilled, he wished to think of nothing but preparation for death.”<sup>1</sup>

He summoned Saint Vincent, and inquired the best way of doing this. “Sire,” replied the saint, “imitate our Lord Jesus Christ, and perfectly submit, as He did, to the will of His heavenly Father: *not My will, but Thine be done!*” “O Jesus,” answered the holy monarch, “this is what I desire with all my heart. Yes, my God, I repeat it, and wish to do so with the last breath of my life, *Thy will be done!*”

“From his bed he saw the Church of Saint-Denis, and gazed upon it with joy. He had forbidden any great ceremony after his death, and wished that only what was necessary should be carried out. He made the arrangements for his funeral and marked out the

<sup>1</sup> Saint-Simon.



route, so as to cause as little trouble as possible. Pointing to the towers of Saint-Denis, he said, 'Behold where I shall soon be, and where I shall remain for a long time. My body will be greatly shaken, for the roads are bad.' He used to speak at length on this subject so frightening to nature, and he did it so simply and naturally, that nobody had the remotest suspicion of affectation; nay, all admired such open and constant firmness, and courage as pious as it was heroic."<sup>1</sup>

The doctors urged him to take a little nourishment, but he had a great repugnance, and seeing the end so near, he thought he was not bound to force himself. Nevertheless, he had a scruple about it, and beckoning to Saint Vincent, "M. Vincent," said he, "the doctors are anxious that I should take nourishment, but I have refused, for I am certainly dying; what do you say?" "Sire," replied Saint Vincent, "the doctors always desire the patient to take nourishment as long as the slightest strength remains, in the hope of recovery. Hence, if your Majesty pleases, it is better to take some." The King, then calling Seguin, ordered some soup. Towards evening he received the last sacraments in the most holy dispositions.

"The next day, May 13, the eve of his death, towards mid-day, God deigned to honour so holy a life and death with an extraordinary grace. Noticing the Prince de Condé among many other lords standing by his bed, the King fixed his eyes upon him, and though the conversation was not of war, said, 'Your son has gained a signal victory.' He alluded to the young Duke d'Enghien and to the victory of Rocroy, which took place a few days after. The Prince de Condé and all present, surprised at this prophecy, doubted whether a

<sup>1</sup> Saint-Simon.

prediction so precise and clear, but so unexpectedly given, was the effect of a wandering of his mind, although up to that he had shown no signs of it whatever. As a matter of fact, he replied immediately and most intelligently when they questioned him to ascertain the state of his mind, which remained perfectly sound to the very last. He explained what he had said like those who have prophesied, sometimes using the past for the future, and announced as accomplished what God had revealed to him, although the event only happened a few days afterwards. The victory of Rocroy took place, in reality, on May 19. But God was pleased to show it beforehand to His servant and cause him to predict it, in order to exhibit before the world his humility, detachment, solid piety, signal virtues, and to clearly show that his mercy was to be crowned with a crown of justice and eternal happiness.

"On the evening of the 13th, the doctors, noticing their patient becoming sleepy and his eyes heavy, feared that he was about to expire, and told the confessor, who immediately roused the King, saying that the doctors thought it was time to begin the prayers for the dying. Instantly, filled with the Spirit of God, he embraced the good priest and thanked him for such good news. Then raising his eyes and hands towards heaven, he repeated the *Te Deum* with such fervour, that the very remembrance of it even now affects me."<sup>1</sup>

Thus the night passed, the saintly King from time to time expressing some touching and exalted sentiments on the happiness of dying, the hope of a better life, and the joy of seeing his Lord and his God. An historian says, no one among ancients or moderns had shown such courage at the point of death.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Saint-Simon.

<sup>2</sup> Priolo, quoted by Saint-Simon.

About ten o'clock the next day he summoned the principal doctor. "Seguin," he said, with a strong voice, "feel my pulse, and tell me, I beg of you, how many hours I have to live; but make certain, for I wish to know the truth." Seguin in silence felt his pulse, and then coolly replied, "Sire, your Majesty can only have two or three hours more." Then joining his hands and looking up to heaven, the King quietly exclaimed, "Well then, my God, with all my heart I am resigned!" Then turning towards Saint Vincent, he said, while stretching out his emaciated arms, "See, M. Vincent, the arms of a King, are they not just like any other man's?" Bouvart, taking his arm in turn, said, "Sire, if I am not mistaken, your Majesty's soul shall soon be delivered from the prison of this body, for your pulse has ceased to beat."—"My God," exclaimed the monarch, "have mercy on me!" The prayers for the agonising were begun, which he answered in a weak and faltering voice, and after a few minutes calmly expired in the arms of Saint Vincent de Paul.<sup>1</sup> It was on May 14, that his father, Henry IV., had died—"a remark worthy of notice," says Saint-Simon. "It was the feast of the Ascension, the day of the triumph of Jesus Christ, of the release of the souls of the just and their entrance into heaven."<sup>2</sup>

The next day Saint Vincent wrote: "As long as I have been on earth I never witnessed a more Christian death. I never saw greater union with God, more tranquillity, more fear of the smallest sin, or greater goodness and recollection in a person of such condition." Such language from such a judge fitly closes the eulogium of our greatest King since Saint Louis.

Anne of Austria, who succeeded as mother of Louis

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iii. p. 388.

<sup>2</sup> Saint-Simon.

XIV. and Regent for him, had not—far from it—the virtue of Louis XIII., though she was a most Christian woman. Whether it was of her own initiative, or moved by the words of Saint Vincent to the late King concerning the terrible responsibility of royalty, especially in the nomination of bishops, one of her first acts was the creation of what is known as the Council of Conscience. The object of this council was to aid in the selection of persons for benefices. Saint Vincent was made a member, besides Cardinal Mazarin, Chancellor Séguier, M. Charton, Grand Penitentiary of Paris, and the Bishops of Beauvais and Lisieux.

The astonishment of our saint cannot be expressed on hearing of his election. He, who only sighed for a hidden life and devotion to the poor, was unwillingly forced to enter the court, and more alarming still, to assist in the selection of bishops, archbishops, and all the highest dignitaries in the Church. This is a delicate matter at any time, but more especially then, when the great families were sending their younger sons into the Church, and claiming for them, even from their youth and independently of their morals, bishoprics and abbeys. For once our saint was planning how to rid himself of such a burden. He sent some friends to speak for him, and determined even to appeal to the Queen herself, but all proved fruitless before her unbending will. She declared that he should render this service to God and her son, the King.<sup>1</sup> Saint Vincent acceded, although he at once foresaw very clearly the great storms and violent attacks to which he exposed himself on this sea of the court. Experience had taught him that in maintaining justice and piety he was sure to receive many contradictions and persecu-

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. ii. p. 133.

tions, yet he believed that he could not do better than abandon himself to Divine Providence, resolving always to act uprightly, and under all circumstances to remain faithful to God and the King."<sup>1</sup>

This position afforded Saint Vincent an *entrée* to the court, and anybody else would have profited by it to come in contact with the Queen as often as possible. Far different was the intention of Saint Vincent. From the beginning he made it a rule never to go to court except to attend the Council of Conscience, or by a formal command of the Queen. It was by no means congenial to him to be among a crowd of courtiers, where, however, many bishops and cardinals were to be met.

He also resolved to go to court in his everyday dress, in his old heavy and patched soutane, which is still preserved as a relic, with his poor woollen cincture, his big shoes and worn-out hat ; but all, though extremely poor, were without spot or stain. One day Mazarin, catching his cincture and turning to the Queen, said, "See, madame, how well dressed M. Vincent comes to court, and the fine cincture he has." The saint merely smiled, and even after this hint from the Cardinal, did not change his costume, but appeared in it before the Queen herself.

When passing through the salons and great halls of the Louvre on his way to attend the Council of Conscience, the lords rose and gave him a profound salute, which he scarcely saw, such was his humility. He passed through quietly, but without stopping to speak, his eyes cast down and his modest deportment were indicative of his great goodness. It was for him a weekly mortification. "I was still very young," deposed M. Pelletier,

<sup>1</sup> Abelly.



Secretary of State under Louis XIV., in giving evidence in the process of the saint's canonisation, "when I first saw the servant of God in the Louvre, and constantly saw him there afterwards. He always had a modest and at the same time a grave dignity. Courtiers, prelates, ecclesiastics, all paid him the greatest respect, which he received with profound humility. On leaving the council, where he had met the noblest of the land, and decided the highest positions in the kingdom, he became as familiar and as simple to the lowest and least as he had been among the slaves of Tunis or among the outcasts of the galley-ships. A holy bishop not having met him since his election to the council, and afterwards seeing him as humble, as affable and ready to oblige as before, could not help exclaiming, 'M. Vincent is always M. Vincent !' It was reported one day that he was marked out for the cardinalate, and the compliments and congratulations were redoubled. But these were only received by him as the thrusts of a dagger. The Roman purple would truly be the purple of martyrdom to his humility."

Another rule which Saint Vincent made from his very entrance to the Council of Conscience was, never to receive anything for himself or those belonging to him. We can understand this as regards himself ; but for those belonging to him, for his dear Congregation, for his poor, might he not have profited by his position to ask, or at least accept, something ? But he was inflexible. "As Secretary of State," continues M. Pelletier, "I frequently came in contact with M. Vincent. He did more good in France for religion and the Church than anybody I know. But I was specially struck by the fact that at the Council of Conscience, of which he was the most important member, there was never any

question of benefiting himself, his Congregation, or the ecclesiastical houses which he had established."

The holy priest felt that if he did not carry this disinterestedness to heroism he should leave himself open to accusations, the very thought of which was sufficient to make him shudder. One day a person offered him 100,000 livres in the name of certain parties who wished to have his vote in the council on a matter not burdensome on the people, but possibly injurious to the clergy. Saint Vincent briefly replied: "God preserve me from such a thing! I would prefer to die rather than do so." On another occasion a distinguished magistrate, eager to procure an abbey for his son, who was unworthy, and fearing especially Saint Vincent's opposition, went to one of the priests of the Congregation and said: "Let M. Vincent procure this appointment for my son, and I undertake, without any effort on his part or of his Congregation, to regain all the rights and titles of which Saint-Lazare has been deprived. I see clearly how this is to be done. Let M. Vincent have no scruple, nor lose such an opportunity of benefiting his Congregation." When this great inducement was reported to him the saint merely answered: "For all the wealth in the world I will never act contrary to God or my conscience. The Congregation will never perish through poverty; rather, it is the neglect of it that will bring about its ruin." He made a similar reply to a distinguished governor who requested him to do him a service at court, and in return he would support the missionaries whom some influential people were trying to establish in the place. "I will do what I can for you," he said; "but as regards the priests of the mission, I beg of you to leave them to God. I had rather not see them in your city at all, than that

they should be there by the authority and favour of men.”<sup>1</sup> All such proposals, no matter how tempting, were rejected by his disinterestedness like arrows from off a hard shield.

But what Saint Vincent hoped for, more than anything else, was to reap profit from a position which he had not sought, and in which God had placed him against his inclination, by working as far as in him lay, sweetly and patiently, but with all his zeal, to complete the reform of the clergy of France by nominating worthy bishops. On that everything depended. If the bishops are without vocation, without learning, without virtue, unworthy even of being priests, scandalising their clergy as well as their flocks, what can be expected? If they do not reside in their dioceses, except when they come to collect their revenues, to ornament their estates, and restore their grand palaces, how can the priests be humble, modest, detached, and contented with their poor dwellings? If the bishops are ambitious, ever thinking their sees too small, anxious to raise themselves to archbishoprics and to the cardinalate, and thus always intriguing, will not the priests act likewise and look for good prebends, abbeys and bishoprics? Now all these disorders were prevalent at the time and rendered the reform of the clergy almost impossible.

The first thing that Saint Vincent set about correcting in the Council of Conscience was the nomination of children to episcopal sees. To be nominated to an abbey, it should be necessary to have completed the eighteenth year; to a priory, or to a canonry in a cathedral church, the sixteenth; and in a collegiate church, the fourteenth. As to bishops, the candidate should be at least one year ordained priest. Alas! these

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iii. p. 406.

expressions reveal the wounds of the Church of France in the seventeenth century. The evil must have been deep indeed when Saint Vincent asked only so little.

The second point the saint sought to establish was that before bishops were nominated the property of the see should not be made away with. There was a custom of burdening the episcopal revenues with annuities in favour of lords and their sons, so that when the poor bishop came he had not sufficient for necessary expenses and good works. Thus it arose, especially in the provinces, that bishops would not reside in their sees, and came to Paris seeking better places or priories and abbeys to increase their fortunes.

Thirdly, Saint Vincent secured the abolition, or at least the diminution, of what were known as *dévolus*. Some ecclesiastics obtained a patent by which they were permitted to fix their title to a bishopric, abbey, or canonry, of which they would enter into possession, if they could succeed in obtaining the resignation of the legitimate incumbent. Thus they harassed him, ever spying after him, reporting him to the tribunal, and obliging him either to give in or ransom himself by a large sum of money. It was a licence for ambition and espionage.

But what Saint Vincent gained more than anything else was to have it laid down as a principle, that for the future those only should be appointed to bishoprics, abbeys, or canonries, who should possess the qualities required by the Council of Trent, namely, sufficient learning and tried virtue. It was not difficult to have the expediency of this principle admitted ; but hard, delicate, and heroic were the struggles necessary to reduce it to practice. The Queen was well inclined, but feeble-minded and completely in the hands of Mazarin. The

latter, though a cardinal, was not a priest. He had faith, but it was very elastic. Mazarin, even more than Richelieu, looked at Church matters from a political standpoint. Surrounded by enemies, twice driven from the kingdom, he would stop at nothing in order to win or overcome a great lord. Trafficking in bishoprics and abbeys was of slight account with him. The other two members of the council were excellent. Chancellor Séguier, belonging to the illustrious family of that name, was related to Cardinal de Bérulle and Mme. Acarie; the other was M. Charton, Grand Penitentiary of Notre-Dame. Saint Vincent was assured of their support when upholding the honour and holiness of the clergy; but neither of them was able to resist Mazarin. Thus was the saint situated in the Council of Conscience. So long as the episcopal nomination did not interfere with his political or other interests, Mazarin did not mind; and in this way, during ten years our saint was enabled to make many wise selections. But neither the unworthiness of the candidate nor any other objection could prevent Mazarin when political interests were at stake. However, the saint did not hesitate to speak out, slowly and deliberately, giving reasons for rejecting such and such a person; and having acted thus, if, notwithstanding, the election took place, he silently submitted. But how it stung so sensitive a soul as his! He groaned under the burden, and all his correspondence at this period breathes his sorrow. "I shudder," he would say, "when I think that this cursed traffic in bishoprics may draw down the anger of God on the kingdom." And to a superior of his house in Rome he wrote: "I was never more deserving of compassion than I am at present, nor of more prayers than since I entered this new office of mine.



I hope it will not last long. Pray for me." And to another of his priests: "I pray to God every day that I may be regarded as a fool, as I am, and be relieved of this office, and have a better opportunity of doing penance for my sins." Again, when it was reported that he was in disgrace at court, he said: "Would to God it were true!" as he lifted his eyes to heaven and struck his breast. "But, wretch that I am, I am not worthy of such a favour." He wrote in the same strain to Father Codoing, superior at Rome, on January 4, 1645: "God be praised for all you told me. It is true that for a time, it seemed likely that I should be no longer tolerated in this position, but my sins have prevented God from accepting my prayers and sacrifices to rid myself of this office." There is seldom smoke without fire, and as a matter of fact Mazarin was working hard to have Saint Vincent dismissed from the Council of Conscience. It must be said, however, to the honour of Anne of Austria, that the Cardinal could not extort her consent. Then, with his habitual cunning, he began to convoke the council irregularly, not having any appointed day, and as it were by chance not inviting Saint Vincent on the days when he determined to nominate a person to whom the saint had objected.

The Queen was well intentioned, and Saint Vincent, whom she revered, could confidently rely upon her, but unfortunately Mazarin had the upper hand, and often she signed nominations which her conscience reproved. Worried with the struggle, and not succeeding in winning over our saint, Mazarin resolved to abolish the Council of Conscience altogether. Mme. de Motteville, the faithful friend of Anne of Austria, discreetly reveals the feeble resistance and pain of the Queen. But at that time everything yielded before the will of the

imperious minister. "Shortly afterwards," writes Mme. de Motteville, "the Council of Conscience was done away with, because its chief member, M. Vincent, a single-minded man, who did not wish to curry favour at court, was ridiculed on account of his humility, mortification and evangelical simplicity, which were by no means congenial to the vanity, ambition and self-interest that prevailed there. The Queen, who had established the council, was very anxious to retain it, and expressed to him her scruples on the point; but she was weak in this matter, and often yielded to her minister's opinion, not thinking herself as capable as he, nor even as capable as she really was in many things. Thus it was the Cardinal could easily persuade her to do as he wished, and to yield after some resistance to his arguments. I know, however, that, especially in the selection of bishops, the Queen had great difficulty, and the more so when she saw that she had followed Mazarin's advice too readily on this important point. She did not always do this, and never without consulting Saint Vincent, as long as he lived, or others whom she deemed capable of giving advice. She was sometimes deceived by the false virtue of the candidates whom the pious persons sent by her to examine, too easily recommended. However, notwithstanding her minister's indifference on this subject, God granted that this princess should witness most of those elevated during her regency, leading most exemplary lives."<sup>1</sup>

It was not only in the Council of Conscience that Saint Vincent was saddened in witnessing the honour of the Church and the interests of souls so frequently and so readily sacrificed: outside of it he was besieged with solicitations that made him shudder, and often these were accompanied with injuries, threats, calumnies and

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoire de Mme. de Motteville.*

even blows. A religious highly esteemed in his order for his regularity, and outside of it for his eloquence, wrote to him one day to tell him that owing to his long labours and the austerity of his rule, he found his strength failing, and he feared that he should not be able to serve God and the Church much longer. "But," he added, "if the Crown would make me Suffragan to the Archbishop of Rheims, I should, as bishop, be dispensed from fasts and other religious austerities, and might yet preach for many a day with power and good results. I beg you, as my friend, to tell me what you think of this, and if your opinion is favourable, to help me to obtain a nomination from the King, in which I am sure of the support of persons who have credit and influence at court." The saint replied by a letter, in which we recognise among other things a mild and quiet irony. "I do not doubt that your Reverence would do wonders in the episcopate if you were called to it by God; but He has given you such great success in all your works in the place where you are, that there is no reason to suppose that it is His will to remove you. For, if His Providence called you to the episcopate, it is not to yourself that He would apply to place you there. He would rather put it into the hearts of those in whose power it is to appoint persons to ecclesiastical offices and dignities, to make choice of you, without your putting yourself forward, and in that case your vocation would be pure and certain. But to offer yourself could hardly be right, and you could not hope for the blessing of God on such a change, which could neither be desired nor sought after by a soul truly humble, as yours is. And besides, Father, what a wrong you would do to your order by depriving it of one of its principal supports, which sustains and adorns

it, both by doctrine and example. If you were to open the door you would give occasion to others to go out, as well as yourself, or at least to grow weary of the practices of penance. They would be sure to find some excuse for lightening and diminishing them, to the injury of your rule. Nature wearies of austerities, and if we consult her, she will say it is too much, that we must spare ourselves in order to live longer and do God more service. Instead of which our Lord says, *'He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life shall save it.'* You know better than I do all that may be said on this subject, and I should not have ventured to write my thoughts about it, if you had not desired me to do so. But forsooth you have not thought enough of the crown which awaits you. O my God, how glorious it will be! You have already done so much to win it, and perhaps there remains but little more for you to do. You only need to persevere in the narrow way on which you have entered, which leads to life. You have already overcome the greatest difficulties; you must therefore take courage, and hope that God will give you grace to conquer the smaller ones. If you take my advice, you will desist for a time from the labour of preaching, in order to recover your health. You may render many services to God and to your order, which is one of the holiest in the Church of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

On another occasion, M. Chavigny, Secretary of State, one of the highest personages at the time, having lost his second son, who enjoyed the revenues of two abbeys, the family came to secure them for the third son, a child of five or six years. Saint Vincent, to whom they applied, decidedly refused. He awaited in patience to receive some remonstrance from M. Chavigny, but was

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iii. p. 408.

agreeably surprised. "This minister came to see me," writes Saint Vincent, "and said that, far from being displeased with my firmness, he should have been scandalised if I had acceded—nay, should have despised me and refused the offer."<sup>1</sup> The true doctrine was beginning to be felt, although Saint Vincent did not always find persons with such Christian sentiments. "You are an old fool," said a young man who had been frustrated in his design. "You are quite right, sir," the holy and aged priest replied, at the same time falling on his knees, "and I beg your pardon for provoking you."

Another time a distinguished lady was endeavouring to obtain a benefice for one of her sons. "Excuse me, madame," the saint interrupted, "but I have got nothing to do with the matter." At first dumfounded at being received less ceremoniously by a poor priest than by the great lords, and then carried away by her pride and passion, she exclaimed, "Unquestionably, sir, we can do without you, and accomplish what we want otherwise. Indeed I paid you too much respect in coming to you at all, and it is plain you don't know how to treat a lady of my rank." Saint Vincent preserved a profound silence which not even her insults could break. Sometimes an applicant when rejected would even go so far as to strike the saint, which happened in the case of a lord who publicly struck him, because he refused to recommend his son for a bishopric. "You are quite right," said the saint, as the lord stepped into his carriage, "I am a miserable wretch and a sinner." But the saint was not satisfied even with this expression of humility, and ran after the carriage and made a most respectful salute.<sup>2</sup> Again, a young man of social standing having petitioned for an abbey, obtained it on condition that Saint Vincent did

<sup>1</sup> "Letters."

<sup>2</sup> Maynard, vol. iii. p. 412.



not oppose him. The young man repaired at once to Saint-Lazare, accompanied by his guardian, who, on behalf of the family, thanked the saint in advance, spoke of the fitness of the candidate for the benefice and of his other good qualities. To all this grand display Saint Vincent, informed beforehand, quietly drew a picture of the very opposite colour, and wound up by a refusal couched in his usual style. "I beg you, sir, to thoroughly understand that I am not going to consent to what God will demand an account." On hearing this the guardian advanced towards him with his clenched hand and poured out a volley of abuse. Seeing that he could not even disturb the saint's serenity he left the room, but Saint Vincent courteously saw him into his carriage.

But the weapon that was most frequently resorted to was calumny, false accusations being brought even to the Queen. "Do you know, M. Vincent," pleasantly remarked the Queen one day, "what is being said of you?"—"Madame," he replied, "I am a great sinner."—"But you ought to defend yourself."—"Many worse things were said against our Saviour and He never defended Himself," replied the saint.

An unworthy ecclesiastic who had lost a benefice, took revenge by spreading a dishonourable story. "If M. Vincent, who cringes to the great, did not advocate my case, it was because I would not pay him. Though such an enemy of simony in others, he practises it himself. I know a person for whom he has just procured a benefice in exchange for his library and a large sum of money." This time the saint was moved, and his first impulse was to write and defend himself. But he had scarcely written two lines when he reproached himself: "O miserable wretch! what am I about? Do I wish to justify myself, when we have just heard that a Chris-

tian, falsely accused at Tunis, has endured torture for three days without uttering a single complaint, although he was innocent of the crime laid to his charge? No, it shall not be." And then he tore up the letter.<sup>1</sup>

When neither threats, nor promises, nor calumnies, nor even violence, succeeded, they began to hide from him the efforts that were being made to obtain bishoprics or abbeys, and apply directly to the Queen or the Cardinal, and thus arose the most painful difficulties of all. I shall merely give two most beautiful examples of the saint's conduct. At a time when the court was absent from Paris, Mazarin wrote to Saint Vincent: "Monsieur,—These lines are to inform you that M. N. having sent a despatch here to ask of the Queen for his son the bishopric of N., which has been vacant for some days, she has granted it to him, the more willingly because he has the necessary qualifications for it, and Her Majesty has been very glad of so favourable an opportunity to acknowledge in the person of the son the services of the father and his zeal for the welfare of the State. The Queen promised to write to you herself on the subject, but I have anticipated her, in order that you may take the trouble to see him and give him such instructions and suggestions as you may judge necessary to enable him to discharge satisfactorily the duties of his office. . . ."

Our saint knew well the candidate's unworthiness. No doubt, before God or man he was not responsible for a nomination in which he had taken no part whatever, and might therefore without injury to his conscience passively acquiesce in Mazarin's instructions. But were the honour and welfare of the Church, the needs of an extensive diocese for a long time neglected, to fall into such incapable hands? The man of God sorrow-

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iii. p. 405.

fully looked around him. Every resource was closed as far as the Queen was concerned, for urged on by Mazarin, she had already signed the royal warrant. To obtain a renunciation from the interested parties was the only alternative. But how hopeless! The saint took a bold step. He went at once to the father of the bishop-elect, an old friend of his, and plainly setting before him the virtues requisite for the episcopate and his son's unfitness, thus concluded: "You are bound to return the warrant that you have received, if you do not wish to expose yourself, your son, and perhaps your whole family, to the indignation of God." The father listened with all the attention which the piety and character of the saint commanded; but the last few words startled him. Frightened by them, he asked for some days to reflect, and the next time the saint came he was received with this exclamation, "O M. Vincent, you have disturbed my rest for several nights!" Then he began to talk of his circumstances and the state of his affairs, his advanced age and the number of his children, and the necessity of providing for them before his death. Alas! the usual excuses with which men strive to close their eyes to duties which are distasteful. Moreover, could not his son have pious and learned ecclesiastics to assist him? In a word, such an opportunity should not be lost. Saint Vincent returned heavy at heart.

At another time the see of Poitiers was vacant. The Duchess of N., a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, set her heart on obtaining it for her son. Well knowing, and with good reason, that Saint Vincent would not enter into her views, she went straight to the Queen and applied for it, representing that the income was but small, but as the family estates lay in Poitou, the desirableness of the position would counterbalance the small-

ness of the revenue. Anne of Austria promised it, and commanded the Duchess to let Saint Vincent know that she would expect him next day at the usual hour in order to sign the deed.

The Duchess went direct to Saint-Lazare. In order to avoid all explanations, she feigned to be in a great hurry, and delivered the Queen's message in the shortest and most abrupt form. In vain Saint Vincent tried to detain her, and entreated her to allow him a few moments' conversation on the subject of her visit. She would not listen to him, and only repeated that she had nothing to add to Her Majesty's orders.

The next day Saint Vincent appeared at the royal palace with a roll of paper in his hand. "Ah," said the Queen, "it is the nomination to the bishopric of Poitiers which you have brought me to sign," and she took the paper. It was blank. "How is this?" exclaimed the Queen in astonishment. "Have you not prepared the nomination?"—"Pardon me, madame," gently replied the holy man; "but if your Majesty is determined on this choice, I must beg that you will yourself write your appointment, in which in conscience I can take no part."—"How sorry I am, M. Vincent," said the Queen, "that I did not speak to you before I engaged my word. But I have been told that the person in question, though deficient in some respects, is equal to the post. The name decided me. I granted the request at once, fearing that the family might change their mind and not be satisfied with so moderate an income; and indeed I hoped that you would be as well pleased as I was to be let off so cheaply."

At these words, which seemed to show that the Queen took no very special interest in the case, Saint Vincent breathed more freely, for there was room to hope

that by appealing to her religious principles he might yet succeed in saving the honour of the episcopate. He therefore answered with respect and deference: "It is true, madame, that, humanly speaking, such a request may appear to your Majesty a very modest one, and that when M. N.'s conduct shall be worthy of his birth and of his position, he may well aspire to the principal places in your kingdom; but, unhappily, that time does not seem to have yet arrived." After thus surmounting the obstacles that her tenderness prompted, he continued: "Yesterday I was very anxious to make some respectful observations to the Duchess, in the hope of persuading her, in her piety, to withdraw a request so full of peril to her soul; but not having been able to make her listen to the truth, it becomes a sacred duty for me to speak without concealment, though with great regret, to your Majesty in the interest both of your honour here and your salvation hereafter."—"I see plainly that advantage has been taken of me," said the Queen with emotion; "but I have given my word, and you are not the man to advise me to break it."—"Madame, according to all the laws of morals, the revocation of a promise is not only a right, but a duty, where that promise has been extorted on false pretences, and still more in this case where it cannot be fulfilled without a crime."—"Crime, M. Vincent! Do you mean to tell me then that I have promised to commit a crime?"—"Certainly not, madame; your Majesty neither intended nor believed that what you were promising was a crime, consequently your promise was not a crime. But you would indeed commit a crime, and a very great crime, if you were to sacrifice a whole diocese to a false sense of honour, and in my soul and conscience I believe such is the position in which you now stand." Urged on by



his zeal, and emboldened at the same time by the disposition in which he found the Queen, he went on to reveal to her the whole truth. "This abbé, madame, whom it has been proposed to you to make a bishop, is most unworthy, and his family are not ignorant of his conduct. They have good reason for wishing to remove him from Paris—but it is not to an episcopal throne that he ought to retire."—"I retract my promise," exclaimed the Queen in alarm, "and I nominate to the see of Poitiers whomsoever you recommend to me. But it must rest with you to make my peace with the Duchess of N., and by repeating to her our conversation, you must not only remove from her mind all thoughts of complaining, but make her see the impossibility of ever speaking of what has passed."

Not a pleasant commission! But having no longer anything to fear except for himself, Saint Vincent went with a light heart to the Duchess. He desired the brother who always accompanied him to remain in the antechamber, while he entered the salon. He was received with great joy, as if he were bringing the warrant in his pocket. "You came from the Queen?" inquired the Duchess. "Yes, madame, I have just left Her Majesty, and I come by her desire to submit to you some observations which I had not the good fortune to be able to lay before you yesterday." Then he related what had passed between him and the Queen. "For the sake of your eternal salvation, madame," he added, "do not take upon yourself for such a son the responsibility inseparable from a bishopric. Seek rather to turn this event to account by recalling him to his duty. Pardon, madame, the liberty I take in speaking thus. The Queen also is deeply distressed at the pain she is giving you, but you would not desire that for your gratification she

should sacrifice her soul. She counts on your religious principles, and does not doubt that on reflection you will, after a few days, feel thankful to her, as you certainly will in eternity, that she has withdrawn her promise."

At these words the Duchess, who for some time had been hardly able to restrain herself, rose, and not content with words, she took up a footstool and flung it at the saint. It struck him on the forehead, making a wound from which blood flowed freely. Without a word he wiped it with his handkerchief, and left the room. The brother whom he had left in the ante-chamber heard the noise, and at the sight of Saint Vincent, guessed what had happened. Indignant that his Father, a priest, and the King's minister, should be treated thus, he would have sprung towards the door of the room, but the saint stopped him. "You have nothing to do there, my brother; this is our way, let us go," and he drew him away. "Is it not a wonderful thing," he added, as they went out, "to see how far a mother's love for her son will carry her?" This was all his revenge.<sup>1</sup>

Noble struggles were those, in which Saint Vincent manifested the highest talent and the most exalted virtue. Gentleness, firmness and the deepest humility were united with the most indomitable energy; patience under injury, gratitude after refusal, and an intrepid zeal for the glory of God, were joined to a respectful submission to royal authority, even when it was misled. "In that man of God," says Fénelon, "shone an incredible discernment of spirits and an exceptional firmness of character. Heedless alike of the favour or the hatred of the great, he looked only to the interests of the

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iii. p. 413.

Church when in the Council of Conscience he gave his advice for the election of bishops. If the other members of the council had followed more frequently the advice of Saint Vincent, who seemed to divine the future, they would have been far from electing men to bishoprics who afterwards gave the greatest trouble." But if he did not succeed in correcting every abuse and irregularity, he had at least the consolation of seeing the episcopal thrones occupied by holy priests, many of them of his own training, who were to secure the regeneration of the Church of France.

But great as the services were that Saint Vincent rendered in the Council of Conscience by increasing the number of holy bishops, he did something higher still, at least for a time—he established the principle. He inspired the Queen, the Cardinal, the ministers, and the great families with an exalted conception of the true priesthood of Jesus Christ. He restrained trafficking and ecclesiastical bribery. He put simony to shame, and in purifying vocations, laid a foundation for the future. Already he had powerfully contributed to this in establishing preparatory and theological seminaries in the form in which they still exist. He had instituted those retreats for the ordinands and for the clergy, that have now become an annual custom ; and lastly, the Tuesday Conferences, the prelude and seed of our present ecclesiastical conferences. Thus he completed his work in the Council of Conscience, and ranks among the first of those great men and great saints, who have made the Church of France, and have given her those solid and fruitful institutions that enable her to withstand every revolution and survive every peril.

BOOK III  
FORMATION OF THE GREAT ARMIES  
OF CHARITY





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CHAPTER I

SAINT VINCENT EMPLOYS LADIES OF THE WORLD  
IN THE SERVICE OF THE POOR

1633-1639

WE must retrace our steps. It is the historian's privilege, and a necessity in a life so complicated as this.

While Saint Vincent de Paul was labouring with such energy and perseverance to reform the French clergy, he was continuing on a larger scale a work that he had already undertaken, namely, the employment of the upper classes in the service of the poor. The profound faith which made him place himself at the service of the poor, made him wish also to see everybody with the same sentiments. He instilled this view into every soul. Against all our sins and failings he saw no more certain remedy than personal and courageous service of the poor. Besides, the circumstances of the time helped to excite this zeal. The poor filled Paris, the large cities and towns, in proportion to which modern society presents no parallel. The religious orders exiled or diminished by Protestantism, hospitals disorganised, and asylums closed—the consequence was that the poor, the young and old, the sick and destitute, all were cast upon the streets. Moreover, their number was yet to be increased

at the end of the Thirty Years' War, when famine and pestilence were to destroy the fairest provinces of France : Lorraine, Burgundy, Champagne, Orléanais, and even the environs of Paris, so as to make a nation hitherto so rich, a theatre of misery till then unknown. Finally, to look into the future, for saints are raised up as much for the future as for the present, an epoch was approaching when democracy was about to make an eruption, and sword in hand, to demand its share in public life. To calm this spirit and make it listen to reason, it was necessary to blend with it all that was sweetest, most beneficent and generous in the upper classes. God provides for the future : for the social misery of the seventeenth century, and for the still more formidable crisis of the eighteenth and nineteenth, He raised up the greatest founder and organiser of charity, Saint Vincent de Paul.

We must not imagine, however, that he had already in deep forethought planned all the organisations which we shall see rise at his suggestion. It was not so. Everything sprang from his ardent, impressionable, tender heart, which could not witness misery without asking how it could be relieved, and from his prudent and resourceful mind, which, at a glance, saw the best and surest remedy.

At the sight, then, of so many poor, so many children, so many young and old destitute in the streets of Paris, and feeling that he was powerless to do anything by himself, he thought of interesting ladies of the world in the work. He turned to them first, because in the domain of charity they are queens. All that earth has of goodness, kindness, tenderness, devotion and self-sacrifice, is in them in an eminent degree. Even the most worldly, the most selfish, is moved at the sight of

misery ; and what then, when to the instinct of nature is added the devotion of a soul inflamed with the love of God ? Saint Vincent had already beautiful examples of this at Châtillon, Mâcon, and Joigny. Everywhere ladies had responded to his appeal and worked wonders. Now in a wider theatre and in presence of frightful misery, he had recourse to the like means and with the like success.

Providence, who had prepared His faithful servant to bear assistance to so many in want, was about to bring to his aid generous and devoted women, who were to form the celebrated assembly of the Ladies of Charity, of which we shall subsequently speak.

At present we shall name only a few, merely to give an idea of that admirable movement among the Christian womanhood of the seventeenth century.

In the first rank, both by her social position and the beauty of her soul, is Richelieu's niece, the Duchess d'Aiguillon. Married at sixteen and a widow at eighteen, she endeavoured to bury her grief with her friends the Carmelites, Mlle. de Fontaine and Mme. de la Bréauté, and humbly asked the habit of St. Teresa. But Richelieu, at the summit of his power, was planning for her a royal alliance, and tearing her from the cloister, obtained a brief from the Pope forbidding the young widow, on account of the great good she might effect in the world, to enter religion. Soon afterwards made, through her uncle's influence, a lady-in-waiting to Mary de Medicis, she appeared at court in a simple costume, without jewellery, but gifted with a beauty and modesty that attracted everybody. The highest noblemen, even princes of royal blood, sought her hand. Richelieu ardently desired a royal alliance ; but that absolute will, that knew no obstacle, was to bend before the

resolution of his niece, never to marry, but to consecrate herself entirely to good works. She was then twenty, renowned for her beauty, possessing an immense fortune and the advantage of being the Prime Minister's niece. Richelieu yielded to her invincible determination not to marry again; but as she manifested anew, and actually carried out her design of entering the Carmelites, he procured a second brief which forbade her, not only for a few years, but for ever to become a Carmelite. Once more she left Carmel amid sobs and tears. Then taking courage, and supported by her two great directors, Saint Vincent and M. Olier, she returned to the world to devote herself more than ever to good works. She was the angel of her uncle, whose house she managed, appeasing his anger, suggesting good works, and trying to soften his inflexible disposition. After so stormy a life, she obtained for him a peaceful end. She became the right hand of Saint Vincent, placing her purse at his command, and his advocate with Richelieu and the Queen. Living in the Petit-Luxembourg, in the parish of Saint-Sulpice, she obtained from M. Olier a key of the church, and, unknown to others, passed part of her nights prostrate before the tabernacle, where many a time M. Olier found her.

After the Duchess d'Aiguillon comes Mme. Gous-sault, below her no doubt in rank, but of no less exalted a character, and who, among other honours, may claim that of suggesting to Saint Vincent the idea of the regular assembly of the Ladies of Charity, of which she was the first president. Married to the President of the Court of Exchequer, she was left a widow and mother of five children when still young, rich and beautiful. To the education of her little children she joined the most ardent love of the poor. She was a woman of intel-

lect, prudence and admirable common-sense, whose advice Saint Vincent constantly sought, and to whom, in difficult matters, he always sent Mlle. le Gras, saying, "Find out what Mme. Goussault thinks." She lived with the Sisters of Charity when they were only beginning, and her great regret when dying, in 1639, was, that she did not completely belong to that Company, still so lowly. To her we owe two great and fundamental works—the Assemblies of Charity, and the reorganisation of the Hôtel-Dieu, of which we shall speak later on.

With Mme. Goussault let us associate her friend, no less elevated in mind and disposition, Charlotte de Ligny, Presidente de Herse. A relative of M. Olier, trained under Saint Francis de Sales, who "loved her as his soul," and stood sponsor for one of her children, she possessed the greatest ardour for good works, and recoiled before nothing. She gave Saint Vincent the use of her house at Fréneville, to establish the Association of Charity, which she supported at her own expense. But her principal devotion, derived no doubt from Saint Vincent, was to aid in the sanctification of the clergy. She spared nothing to maintain the exercises of the ordinands at Chartres and in Paris, and afterwards to assist in the foundation of seminaries.

We must not fail to place among this first group a great friend of the Duchess d'Aiguillon, the Marchioness du Vigean, of noble birth and large fortune, which she learned, first from M. de Bérulle, and afterwards from Saint Vincent, to use in the best possible manner. She had two daughters. The one who remained in the world became, thanks to her intimacy with the Duchess d'Aiguillon, the Duchess de Richelieu, and one of the most distinguished and charitable persons of the time. The younger daughter, Marthe du Vigean, spent a singu-



larly troubled youth. She was hardly nineteen when the Duke d'Enghien, the hero of Rocroy, passionately fell in love with her. His contemporaries say, they never witnessed such devotion. When he was leaving for the war it was amidst sobs and tears, and on setting out for the campaign in which he gained the victory of Nordlingen, he even fainted in bidding her adieu. Mlle. du Vigean was touched with such love in so great a man, and although she reciprocated his affection, yet her love was of angelic purity. The Duke had been almost forced into a marriage distasteful to him, and which he laboured hard to dissolve, thinking to at once marry Mlle. du Vigean. Amid his plans, well capable of stirring the enthusiasm of a girl of twenty, who saw the prospect of a royal alliance, Saint Vincent came one day to visit her mother, who was unwell. After the visit the daughter was showing our saint out, when suddenly he turned and said to her, "Mademoiselle, you are not made for this world." The young girl felt her heart saying within her, "If this man was a prophet he would not speak that way." Then, knowing the power he had with God, she trembled to think that he had asked a vocation for her, and besought him not to do so. The saint smiled, but said nothing. The arrow had struck, and shortly afterwards the fashionable world of the capital learned with admiration that Mlle. du Vigean had buried her beauty, her youth, her hopes and her dreams among the Carmelites, under the name of Sister Martha of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. Pollalion is another grand character. In her tender years, of an extraordinary piety, she had earnestly wished to enter the Capuchins, in the Rue Saint-Honoré. But her parents, on account of her health,

<sup>1</sup> Cousin.

made her abandon this idea and marry M. Pollalion, the French consul at Ragusa, who died shortly afterwards in Rome. A widow then at twenty-six, and highly gifted, Mlle. Pollalion hastened to leave the court, which she perfumed with her virtues, and even, as some say, with her miracles, to devote herself to works of charity under the direction of Saint Vincent de Paul. He, after trying her vocation, sent her, with Mlle. le Gras and some other ladies, to visit the Associations of Charity established in the provinces. These two souls seemed made to perfectly understand and complete each other. Mlle. Pollalion, ardent, enterprising, recoiling before no obstacle, equally capable of publicly chastising a woman who was trying to corrupt a young girl, of becoming a servant to gain the obstinate by her sweetness, or of becoming a peasant in order to instruct the ignorant, could not but gain by coming in contact with Mlle. le Gras, who was so wise, so prudent, and so equable. The latter, in turn, by associating with Mlle. Pollalion, learned to crown her energetic character by a confidence and decision which was less natural to her than to her friend. Independently of the services which Mlle. Pollalion rendered as a Lady of Charity, accompanying Mlle. le Gras on her journeys, she had also a special attraction for aiding poor girls, who, from their appearance, poverty, or neglect, were exposed to the most wicked temptations. She sold her carriage and diamonds, devoted herself to the most humble life, and assisted at first by her daughter and son-in-law, Claude Chastelain, Secretary of the Council of State, and later on by Anne of Austria, she founded a large house in the Rue de l'Arbalète. Here she gathered a hundred and eighty young girls, trained teachers for them, and begged on their behalf; but before reaching this heroic

degree, she had been initiated into works of charity by Saint Vincent de Paul.

Beside these noble ladies, let us mention, and in the same rank, Mme. de Lamoignon, who at first guided by Saint Francis de Sales, and later by Saint Vincent, devoted herself so much to charity that she was called the "mother of the poor." When people saw Saint Vincent going towards her house they used to say, "See the father of the poor going to meet the mother of the poor." Made aware of her death, Saint Vincent wished to see her for the last time, and his prayers interrupted by his sobs were a noble tribute to her memory. Happily she left a daughter, who was to equal, if not surpass her in charity.

Then comes Mme. Fouquet, mother of the minister, a noble soul, full of magnanimity and faith. When she heard of her son's disgrace she only said, "I thank you, O my God; I have ever prayed for my son's salvation, and this is the means."

To this group we must add Mme. de Miramion, who, though coming somewhat later, yet at once took a prominent part. A widow at sixteen, after only six months of a most happy union (1645), she was almost dying of grief when, four and a half months after her husband's death, she was about to give birth to her child. Having been saved by her faith and strength of mind, and by the love of the child she bore in her womb, she placed herself under the direction of Saint Vincent de Paul, and began a life of extraordinary charity. Clad as a servant, she asked Mlle. le Gras to allow her to accompany her while visiting the poor. But her striking beauty shone through her servant's dress, and the noblest sought her hand. Even the bold and celebrated Bussy-Rabutin became passionately attached to her, but she indignantly

rejected him. To avoid such a thing happening again, she conjured Saint Vincent to permit her to become a Nun of the Visitation; but, despite so many perils, the saint would not consent, for he was desirous of retaining so powerful a help for the growing organisations of charity. As a matter of fact, she became their head. She gathered into her house, near Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs, young orphans, whom she fed and taught. During the famine of 1651 she relieved every day over two thousand. When in 1652 the misery increased, and her income was not sufficient, she sold her necklace of pearls for 24,000 francs, and shortly afterwards disposed of her plate. But where she showed herself still more a true daughter of Saint Vincent de Paul was in her zeal for the clergy. She established at her own expense, in the Hôtel-Dieu, a special ward for old or infirm priests, founded the work of ecclesiastical burses to aid vocations, and at her death bequeathed to it 1500 livres.

Here we shall merely mention Mlle. le Gras, whom we shall describe in the following chapter. Becoming a widow at twenty-four, she devoted herself to the service of the poor with such courage, that she did not hesitate to come in contact with the plague-stricken, which evoked such repeated praise from Saint Vincent. "I assure you," he writes to her, when he learned of this act of heroism, "this has so touched my heart that, if it had not been at night, I should have gone at once to see you. But the goodness of God towards those who give themselves to Him for the service of the poor in the Association of Charity, in which no one up to the present has been stricken with the plague, has given me perfect confidence in Him that you shall suffer no evil from it. Would you believe it, I not only visited the sub-

prior at Saint-Lazare, who died of the plague, but even felt his breath ? And yet, neither those who assisted him nor myself have felt any inconvenience from it. No, do not fear. Our Lord wishes to make use of you for another work which concerns His glory, and I think He will preserve you for it."

A number of other ladies took part in this movement of charity: Mlle. Dufay, of whom Saint Vincent so often speaks with such esteem and regard in his letters ; Mlle. du Fresne, the widow of his old friend, on whose virtue the saint relied as upon a rock ; Mlle. Violle, and Mmes. de Traversay, de Bullion, de Nicolai, Joly, and Mlle. Cornuel, and a number of others whom it would be impossible to name here. These ladies, even more distinguished by their virtue than by their social position, and often by their wealth, worked together under the guidance of Saint Vincent de Paul, and by the strength of their union gave birth to one of the greatest movements of charity with which history furnishes us.

The assembly of the Ladies of Charity, as it was now called, was not a mere gathering of pious ladies coming together to hear mass and an instruction. It was a work thoroughly organised, with a president, treasurer, and secretary, each voted to office for a term of three years. The ladies rendered an account of the charity disbursed, and reported new cases, and each one had a vote in the matter. Saint Vincent had not wished to be the president or director of this assembly, but merely to come before it as the advocate of the poor. With what respect he treated the ladies ! He did nothing without first obtaining their advice. Sometimes he consulted them as to whether Protestants should be embraced in their charity and receive assistance. Marshal Fabert thought so, and Saint Vincent was inclined towards the same



opinion.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes he asked assistance for Lorraine, Rethel, and Saint-Quentin. When about to ask the aid of the assembly for a poor family, he came prepared with his reasons, not wishing that assistance should be given merely on his authority. In his note-book we find such items as: "Learn for the information of the Ladies of Charity if so and so is true;" or again, "whether that man has anything to live on;" or again, "has he children, and how many." While putting forward his own opinion he took that of others, and nothing is so touching as to see the simplicity and promptitude with which he abandoned his own view for that of another. Some of the ladies even reproached him for this. "Why," said one of them to him, "do you not follow your own opinion, which is always the best?" — "Madame," replied the saint, "God forbid that my poor thoughts should prevail over those of others! I am well pleased when God acts without me, who am only a miserable wretch."

How could such a man, speaking in such a tone, be refused! Hence the ladies not only gave immense sums, but collected for him. They became his treasurers, and on one occasion, when particularly moved by his eloquence, they formed a reserve fund upon which he might freely draw. One day the Ladies of Charity, wishing to give him a surprise, presented him, through Mme. de Lamoignon, with 80,000 francs to repair Saint-Lazare. "Oh no!" said the saint, "this money will be excellently spent on the poor." Another time Mme. de Bullion gave him 80,000 francs for the General Hospital, and he was most profuse in his thanks. The pious Anna-Maria Martinozzi sent him for the poor a piece of work worth 200,000 francs. The saint got Louis XIV., who alone could pay its value, to purchase

<sup>1</sup> Feillet.

it. All the gifts, however, were not so valuable, but they came in, in proportion to the misery, and when the crisis had passed away it was calculated that at least nine millions had passed through the hands of the Ladies of Charity.

But these ladies were not content with collecting money and becoming the never-failing support of Saint Vincent, they went in person to see the poor in the Hôtel-Dieu. This is what the saint held in highest esteem. "To send money is good," he said, "but we have not really begun to serve the poor till we visit them." He not only desired that the ladies should visit the poor, but taught them how to meet them, talk to them, and serve them. He gave the most exquisitely delicate instructions on this point. "When going to visit the poor," he said, "they should leave off their jewels and finery, and be dressed very simply, for the contrast of luxury on the one side, and poverty on the other, makes the condition of the poor all the more painful." They should also avoid all familiarity on the one hand, or stiffness on the other, but treat them openly, respectfully, and as persons of condition, saluting them with the greatest respect. "*I was hungry, and you gave Me to eat ; sick, and you visited Me.*" He sweetly dwelt on these words. "What an honour to visit Jesus Christ, to clothe Him ! If you look only at the poor they shall inspire disgust ; see in them Jesus Christ, and you will be attracted and charmed." The saint loved to point out in detail the marks of profound respect which should be shown to the poor, saying, the men should raise their hats, and the ladies incline before them as before their superiors. That was sufficient in public, but when alone with the poor he wished that they should kneel at their feet and kiss them. Besides, he counselled nothing

that he did not practise himself. "When he met the poor he saluted them by raising his hat, and when giving them assistance he still kept it off. Often he embraced them and kissed their feet before giving an alms. In short, he treated them, to use his own words, as "his lords and masters." "Our dear poor and sick are our lords and masters, for our Lord is in them and they in Him." Again, he frequently said, "Take great care of our good lords and masters, the poor country-people." He always invited two beggars to dine with him, and seated them in the places of honour, one on his right and the other on his left. They were helped first, he even served them himself, and as it ordinarily happened that they were old, he had them assisted to the refectory.

When he treated the poor in this way, in what manner did his loving heart speak of them? The Ladies of Charity were enthralled while listening to him. One day Mme. de Lamoignon, turning to the Duchess de Mantua, said, "Well, may we not say like the disciples on the way to Emmaus, that our hearts are on fire with the love of God while M. Vincent is speaking? For my part, although I am not very sensitive to spiritual things, I confess my heart is inflamed in listening to him."—"It is not surprising," interrupted Maria de Gonzaque; "he is an angel of the Lord who bears upon his lips the divine fire which burns in his heart."—"That is very true," added a third, "and it depends upon ourselves to share in the ardours of its love."<sup>1</sup>

Not only did he wish the Ladies of Charity to visit the poor, he urged them to work with their hands in making dresses for them. They assembled for that end, and each one adopted the pious practice of making

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iv.

dresses for the poor. The Queen of Poland, Maria de Gonzaque, remained faithful to this habit. "Our good sisters," writes Saint Vincent, "were deeply moved when I told them that your Majesty works in this way for the poor. It is without precedent in the Church of God. History, no doubt, tells us of a princess who made her own clothes, but I remember no one who went so far as your Majesty and made clothes for the poor. I believe such conduct is an object of admiration to heaven and of joy to the Church. God be praised for His blessings towards your Majesty, and may He watch over and protect you for many years, that you may edify His Church."

In the beginning the Ladies of Charity held their meetings in Saint-Lazare. But Saint Vincent, knowing that seed fructifies in proportion as it is more widely scattered, wished that the assemblies should meet successively in different parts of Paris. Hence they were held in Mme. de Lamoignon's house in the Cour de Palais, in the Duchess d'Aiguillon's in the Petit-Luxembourg, in Mme. de Herse's in the Rue Pavée, and in Mme. de Miramion's in the Rue des Bernardins.

Those ladies had a share in all works of charity, maintaining them, directing them, and sometimes reforming or encouraging them. All, however, not being able to attend to so many works at the same time, they formed themselves into committees to study the different questions, as is done in political assemblies. Thus the great assembly of the Ladies of Charity became by degrees split up into different groups suited to the different charities.

The Ladies of Charity of which we here speak must not be confounded with the Association of Charity. These two societies differ in the date of their origin, organisation, and object. The assembly of the Ladies

of Charity was established in 1634, primarily to assist the sick in the Hôtel-Dieu, but soon embraced various other good works. It counted as many as three hundred members, and all of the highest society. It seconded Saint Vincent de Paul in the great works which occupied the last twenty-five years of his life. Its origin was as follows :—

Mme. de Goussault was accustomed to go to the Hôtel-Dieu, where she had a cousin, a nun. In going through the wards she recognised many abuses, or at least defects. Every year about twenty-five thousand persons of every age, sex, country and religion, passed through this institution. What an amount of good could be done here if everything was well organised. In vain had a holy nun, Margaret Bouquet, about twenty years before (1613), tried to inflame by her charity the lukewarmness around her. Soon the disorders crept in again and even increased. Saint Vincent listened attentively to Mme. Goussault, and while acknowledging the state of affairs was very regrettable, and that a great deal of good might be done, yet he felt it was a delicate matter. "God forbid, my daughter," he said, "that I should put my sickle into another man's harvest. The Hôtel-Dieu is governed spiritually and temporally by those whom I regard as very prudent. I have no position nor authority to prevent the irregularities which are to be found there as elsewhere. We must only hope that those whose duty it is, will apply the necessary remedies." Saint Vincent's arguments were golden, but those do not always prevail with ladies. There were abuses to be suppressed and good to be done, so the sensitiveness and timidity of the saint were to be disregarded. Having urged and urged him, and seeing that she could not gain her point, Mme. Goussault went to the



Archbishop of Paris, and obtained from him, in 1634, a letter in which he told Saint Vincent that he would be pleased, he should co-operate in Mme. Goussault's design.

On receiving this intimation the saint no longer doubted of the will of God, and without further deliberation or delay, assembled some ladies of rank and piety in Mme. Goussault's house. Among those who came were Mmes. de Ville-Savin, de Bailleul, de Mecq, de Saintot, de Pollalion, and they at once organised the work. The second meeting was even better attended. At it might be seen Mme. Elizabeth d'Aligre, wife of the Chancellor, Anne Petau, and Marie Fouquet, mother of the Minister of Finance. It was arranged that henceforth the Ladies of Charity should go every day in parties of four to visit the poor in the Hôtel-Dieu. They asked the saint to give them some rules for conducting themselves, and as usual he gave them some exquisitely delicate instructions. On arriving at the Hôtel-Dieu they were to present themselves to the sisters and humbly ask permission to assist them in their work. A refusal would by no means be given to Mme. Goussault, Mme. Lamoignon, and Queen Maria de Gonzague; on the contrary, they would be received with the greatest respect and honour. Thus the Ladies of Charity entered the Hôtel-Dieu, and rooting out bad customs, substituted those based on the highest motives of faith, and in this way worked a reform. In the very first year of their labours more than seven hundred and sixty conversions took place. The business people of Paris even asked to be admitted, and paid their expenses to enjoy the care of the Ladies of Charity.

While Mme. Goussault was occupied with the Hôtel-Dieu, another committee was formed, under the presi-

dency of Mme. de Lamoignon, to look after prisoners. The first class that they came in contact with was that of prisoners for debt—wretched persons who satisfied their creditors with their liberty. The ladies went to see them, investigated their cases, made them acknowledge their fault, consoled and encouraged them, and often opened the doors of the prison by paying their debts. A considerable sum was given annually by the court to the ladies' association for their good work. After seeing to those imprisoned for debt, they naturally passed on to the other prisoners. Saint Vincent wished that they should extend their charity to the galley-slaves, for whom M. Cornuel had left a large grant. "I am expecting M. Cornuel's daughter," wrote Saint Vincent. "Her father has left an annuity of 6000 livres for the assistance of the outcasts." The Duchess d'Aiguillon added to this almost 1500 a year, and thus the care of all classes of prisoners became one of the most flourishing works of the Ladies of Charity.

Other works absorbed the labours and resources of these ladies, such as Mlle. de Pollalion's young girls, the hospice for the aged, the daughters of the Madeleine, but, above all, the foundlings. Nothing has placed a brighter jewel in the crown of Saint Vincent, yet nothing has cost him more courage, more devotedness and more sacrifices, than the foundlings.

What is more beautiful than a child? Yet, before Jesus Christ, what was there more abandoned, or even more harshly treated? If delicate and helpless, it was rudely cast away. Even in the seventeenth century the sweet influences of Christianity had not yet overcome such infamous conduct. One evening as Saint Vincent was returning from a mission, he found a beggar lying against the wall. This wretched creature was engaged

in maiming an infant, in order the better to excite compassion when he went to beg. Seized with horror, the saint ran up to him, saying, "Ah! savage, you have deceived me; at a distance I mistook you for a man." Then taking the little victim in his arms, he went to the Rue Saint-Laindry.<sup>1</sup> Here was what was known as the "Couche," to which foundlings were brought. It was a poor house, badly organised, and kept by a widow and two servants. According to official reports three or four hundred children were admitted here every year. Our saint, touched at what he saw, assembled the Ladies of Charity and revealed everything. A committee was formed to visit the Couche and investigate its miseries. The children were trafficked with in a disgraceful manner. They were sold or abandoned at the least inconvenience, and what was a dishonour to Christians, they were allowed to die without baptism. Saint Vincent yearned to take over all, but how could he do it? A dozen or so were taken by lot, and a kind of inspection of the others was established. The ladies saw that they were baptized, that they were attended to, and had a daily roll-call to prevent any trafficking.

Saint Vincent felt by degrees that the practice of drawing a dozen by lot was becoming more and more objectionable, when at least there were three or four hundred brought in every year. Why not adopt all? No doubt the number was large, but what matter, the Sacred Heart is larger still. He turned to the Ladies of Charity, and urged them so forcibly, that they readily undertook the care of all the infants. It was more than they were able. But Saint Vincent was determined to use every resource to aid them, going to the Queen, to the

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iii.

King, and the great lords for assistance. The Queen contributed a large amount, and the King gave an annuity of 8000 francs. The other noblemen raised this sum to 40,000, yet even so much was insufficient to support the number of foundlings that were received.

Under ordinary circumstances they would have had enough, but the misery of Lorraine, Champagne, Burgundy, and the wars of the Fronde had rendered uncertain these annuities. The Ladies of Charity declared with sorrow that the expense was beyond their power, and that it was necessary to abandon the work.

Saint Vincent, fearing lest so necessary an institution should be a failure, made new and heroic efforts to sustain it. He sent into the provinces the most zealous and skilful of the members to collect, and when the funds came to an end, convoked a larger meeting of the ladies than he had held before, in order to make a last effort.

When the ladies had assembled, the saint proposed the question : Is the work to be continued or given up ? "You are free, ladies," said he. "You contracted no obligation, and may withdraw at once. But before taking any resolution, reflect seriously on what you have been doing and on what you are about to do. Through your charity a very large number of children have been preserved, who otherwise should have perished for time and eternity. These innocent creatures, while learning to speak, have learned to know and love God. Some have grown up and are no longer a burden to you. Does not so successful a beginning presage a happy future ?"

As he continued, the saint's heart expanded, till the fire of his charity broke out in his famous peroration : "Yes, ladies, compassion and charity have led you to

adopt these little creatures for your children; you became their mothers by grace, when their mothers by nature abandoned them; see now whether you too will forsake them. Cease to be their mothers, to become for the moment their judges; their life and death are in your hands. I await your decision. The time has come for you to pronounce sentence, and to declare whether or not you will still have pity on them. If you continue your charitable care over them they will live; if you abandon them they will undoubtedly perish. Your own experience forbids you to doubt it."

The assembly was moved to tears, and with one voice exclaimed that the work was to be continued.<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact it was continued. Sustained by Saint Vincent, aided by new letters-patent from the King, the work of the foundlings traversed the eighteenth century, triumphantly entered the nineteenth, and even to-day sheds an aureola of glory round Saint Vincent de Paul, religion and the Church, before which must bow in reverence and gratitude every man who has a heart.

The Association of Charity, of which we spoke in Chapter V. of Book I., was extending more and more every day. It was not long till it reached Paris, and produced there similar fruit to that in the provinces. In 1629 the work was established in the parish of Saint-Sauveur, then in Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, and in almost all the parishes of the capital. As time went on, however, relaxation crept into the assemblies, and the rules were not always observed. To reform them and rekindle their first fervour, Saint Vincent sent from time to time some zealous ladies to visit the assemblies, and to add fuel to the fire of their charity.

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iii.



The person most frequently entrusted with this duty was Mlle. le Gras. In 1629, with Saint Vincent's blessing, she started for Champagne, and went to Montmirail and the neighbouring towns. Bringing with her clothing, a medicine chest, and some money, she was accustomed first to go to the church, pay her respects to the curé, ask his blessing and get the necessary instructions. Next she convoked a meeting of the association if there was one, or if not, she tried to establish it. She brought together the young girls, spoke to them of charity towards the poor, stirred up their enthusiasm, and determined them to place themselves at their service. In 1630 she visited Saint-Cloud, Villepreux, Villiers-le-Bel, Liancourt, Bulle, and went even to Beauvais, where she found that the Bishop had already established eighteen assemblies of charity. At this sight she could not restrain her joy, and spoke with such ardour that even men concealed themselves in order to listen. On her departure the people went a part of the way with her, and were most profuse in their thanks. After this journey she stopped for a short time in Paris, and went on to Senlis, Verneuil, then to Gournay, Neufville-le-Roy, and a second time to Bulle. Everywhere she revised the accounts, saw the number of families visited, how the funds were invested, the number of sheep, and finally noted the names. Towards the end of 1631 she again set out for Champagne, but was there unexpectedly interrupted by the Bishop of Châlons, a holy man, but not in favour of what seemed to him a novelty, and for this reason he asked her to return to Paris. "If his lordship wishes to see you," writes Saint Vincent, "go and explain to him with all simplicity what you are doing. Offer to retrench anything which he desires, or to cease altogether if it pleases him.

That is the spirit of God." The Bishop having persevered in his objection, Saint Vincent wrote to Mlle. le Gras to return at once to Paris. "How happy you are," he wrote to console her, "in being, like the Son of God, obliged to withdraw from a province where, thanks be to God, you were doing no evil! Imitate Saint Louis in the tranquillity with which he returned from the Holy Land without having accomplished his design. Perhaps you shall never have a better sacrifice to offer to God."<sup>1</sup>

Similar journeys were made by Mlle. de Pollalion, Mlle. du Fresne, and Mlle. Violle. Mme. Goussault wished to visit the district around Orleans and Anjou. Before her departure, Saint Vincent asked her to send him a detailed account of her journey, and this precious document reveals in what a spirit of zeal and charity these ladies laboured throughout France in the seventeenth century. Accompanied by some young ladies, and attended by two of her servants, Mme. Goussault set out from Paris. When they started in the carriage they recited the *Itinerarium* and spent some time in prayer. Then they beguiled the length of the journey by pious reading, holy conversation and hymns. After dinner they recited the rosary and the litany of the Blessed Virgin. On arriving in a village they saluted its guardian angel, and if they stopped there, their first visit was to the church, and their second to the hospice, if there was one. Their motto was, "God and the poor," always and everywhere.

At Etréchy, Mme. Goussault entertained herself while dining with some little children whom she felt were the chosen ones of God. "I had great joy," she said, "in teaching them the Our Father, and it

<sup>1</sup> *Vie de Mlle. le Gras.*

made me forget the sadness I felt on leaving this morning."

At Étampes, while her servant was buying some things for the sick, Mme. Goussault entertained the young superioress of the Hôtel-Dieu with her conversation. "I was dressed as a servant," she writes, "and she said to me, 'Who are you? Are you married? I have often heard of Mlle. Acarie, and I think you are another like her.'" In the same way she discoursed with the hostess that evening after supper.

The next day at Angerville, not having a hospice to visit, she went to the church, and finding there some children, taught them to make the sign of the cross.

At Arthenay she taught catechism. At Orleans she visited the Hôtel-Dieu, rich indeed, but in consequence of the insufficient number of the religious, the sick were left to the care of servants. She intended to stop a few days, but was so displeased at having to lodge with Huguenots that she left at once.

At Blois she found plenty of devotion, but the Hôtel-Dieu not visited and badly organised. The Jesuits exhorted the ladies to visit the sick, but, as one of her cousins remarked, "Providence left it to her to show how ladies of the upper classes in Paris were performing these charitable works." Thus she spent the whole journey, seeking God alone in works of charity, and never stopping to gratify curiosity or take any pleasure.

On her arrival at Angers she was met by two gentlemen, who insisted on preventing her going at once to visit the Hôtel-Dieu, and forced her to submit to a grand reception. The next day the principal persons of the place waited on her, and she had scarcely time to assume her humble costume before visiting the hospital. She

found everything there well ordered. While at Angers, in obedience to the words of our Lord in the Gospel, "*I was a prisoner*," she visited the prisons, and distributed alms, pictures and rosaries. "What displeases me here," she says, "is that everything becomes known and talked too much about."

When teaching the catechism in presence of some young ladies in order to show them how it should be done, one of them said: "It is evident how much you love the poor, and that you are delighted to be among them. You seem doubly charming while you are speaking to them." A priest told her that he felt himself happy in simply listening to her. "Now, Father," this humble soul hastens to add in her letter, "it is for your sake I write, that you may praise and thank God. Ask Him to destroy my pride by whatever means He wishes, for I am ready to lose and leave all things, preferring humility to any and every consolation."

"The young ladies came to be instructed by her. 'If you were here for a year,' said one of them, 'you would convert the whole town.' What was most attractive in Mme. Goussault was the manner in which she united simplicity and affability with virtue. She did not pose as a reformer, but lived simply and uprightly. She thoroughly enjoyed an hour at backgammon, for she always condescended in what was not sinful. Hence she had only one regret after her stay at Angers, and that was that she had refused to allow her portrait to be taken. 'It is the custom,' she writes; 'everybody does it, and after death it is placed in the church near the tomb. Now I refused to have mine taken, and I am sorry, for it seems to me to have been false humility, and condescension would have been better.'"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iii.

Can anything be more beautiful than those great ladies employing their lives in this way? For thirty or forty leagues round Paris, beyond the Loire, into the heart of Champagne, and to the borders of Burgundy, they were everywhere reviving charitable works, and by their words, but still more by their deeds, enkindling in souls a love for the poor.

Suddenly this great movement of charity received its crowning success. The Queen, hearing of all the good done in Paris and elsewhere by the Ladies of Charity, wished to institute an assembly composed of ladies of the court, and of which she herself might be president. She asked Saint Vincent to draw up the rules, and we cannot but be struck with admiration in reading them:—

“ This assembly shall be composed of Her Majesty the Queen, and a few others whom it may please Her Majesty to select. They shall assist the Ladies of Charity who visit the Hôtel-Dieu, the foundlings, the outcasts, Mlle. Pollalion’s little orphans, the poor girls of the parish, those of the Madeleine ; in a word, all similar charitable undertakings.

“ They shall go in parties of three to inspect each of these charities, finding out the necessities of each, in order to have assistance given to them. This shall be their duty for a year, when they shall change the departments of which they had charge. But Her Majesty shall always remain president of the assembly.

“ Those ladies shall study to acquire Christian perfection suitable to their state, spend half-an-hour in meditation and hear mass daily. They shall read a chapter from the *Introduction to a Devout Life* or *The Love of God*, make an examination of conscience every day, and confess and communicate at least each week.



“They shall assemble by order of Her Majesty every first Friday of the month, and spend half-an-hour in conversing on the virtues suitable to their state. Next, they shall report the cases of want and the difficulties which each one discovered in the department over which she presided. Her Majesty, having heard the report and taken the opinion of the ladies, shall command what seems best.

“It shall be a maxim among them not to treat, while at the assembly, of other topics, especially those concerning the State. They shall not take occasion at their meetings to forward their own interests, but honour and love Her Majesty, and entertain a mutual affection for one another. They shall assist and console one another, and communicate for sick and deceased members. Finally, they shall honour the silence of our Divine Lord in all that regards their assembly, for Satan frustrates holy enterprises that are divulged.

Behold then the highest nobility of France, even the Queen, at the feet of the poor. See the great ladies of Paris and the provinces giving all their influence, their devotion, their fortune, and their very service to the sick, to foundlings, to prisoners and outcasts, consoling their sorrow, healing their wounds, and by their heroic example reviving the ministry of charity confided to Christian womanhood. “For more than eight hundred years,” says Saint Vincent de Paul, “women have had no public employment in the Church. See here how Providence calls on you, ladies, to supply this want.” And again: “The maintenance and instruction of the poor at the Hôtel-Dieu, the nursing and rearing of foundlings, the care of providing for the spiritual and temporal wants of criminals condemned to the galleys, the assistance given to the desolated frontiers and provinces,

the contributions to the missions of the East, North, and South ; these are the labours of your association, ladies. What ! ladies did all this ! Yes, this is what for twenty years God has given you the grace to undertake and accomplish." Again, Mlle. le Gras, whose voice is the echo of Saint Vincent's, says : " It is evident that, in our age, Divine Providence desires to make use of our sex, to show men that it is He alone who wishes to help the afflicted and to give them powerful aids to salvation. Has it not been by this light that the ladies of the Company have recognised the needs of the poor, and that God has given them grace to help them so charitably and so heroically, that Paris has become the admiration and example of the whole kingdom ? "

But let us continue, we have yet to contemplate greater wonders.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SISTERS OF CHARITY

1633-1642

THERE are few religious Congregations in modern times that have done greater honour to the Catholic Church, or won more sympathy for themselves, than the Sisters of Charity. Yet there is no institution whose future was less foreseen, even by its very founders. "O God!" says Saint Vincent de Paul, "how can it be said that I founded the Sisters of Charity? I did not even think of it, nor did Mlle. le Gras." In the beginning this Congregation was composed of some country girls, without much education, and employed merely as auxiliaries of the Ladies of Charity. No other end was then in view. We are now about to see with what care Saint Vincent trained them, and how he formed these extraordinary women, destined by God for the great crisis of modern times, uniting as they do the purity of virgins with the devotedness of mothers.

As long as the Association of Charity was established in the country, those who belonged to it were usually of the middle class, and they attended the sick in a manner that left nothing to be desired. It was not so in Paris, where the ladies of society could not always suit themselves to meet the wants of the poor. Experience soon showed that something was wanting. Some of the members were too distinguished to visit

the poor and sick, and they sent their servants. But of what value were their services? Others were prevented by their husbands, and when the plague broke out, were absolutely compelled to remain at home. Besides, if among the ladies of the association there were heroines of charity, on the other hand others were not so reliable, and could not always be counted on. Saint Vincent saw that the work was not progressing, and that soon it should give way if the ladies were not assisted by some young girls of humble condition, who would adapt themselves to the circumstances. The towns and villages supplied plenty of modest, generous-hearted girls, who, not anxious to marry, yet never thinking of entering religion, were capable of tending the sick and of co-operating in a good work, even more than ladies of quality. Nobody had met more of that class than Saint Vincent, while giving missions through the country, and these, he thought, might become assistants of the Ladies of Charity.

Soon a certain number were allotted to the different parishes in Paris, two in Saint-Sulpice, one in Saint-Nicolas, one in Saint-Laurent and Saint-Sauveur. They lodged with the Ladies of Charity, and during the week visited the poor and sick, and then reported the cases of destitution or want. On Sundays they assembled in Saint-Lazare and were lectured on their duties. In the beginning they were known simply by their baptismal names. Thus Saint Vincent writes, "As to Marguerite, it will be well to take care of her." Later on the name of the parish was added; for example, Marguerite of Saint-Paul, Marie of Saint-Laurent. Often Saint Vincent even suppressed the baptismal name, as here, "The ladies complain about her of Saint-Merry." By degrees, however, we notice in the saint's letters

such expressions as this, "Cannot our Sister Louise come?"

Many of those girls who presented themselves were rather rough. "Yesterday," writes Saint Vincent, "one came who seemed very uncouth. I have not inquired if the one from Ardennes can read or sew; I very much doubt whether she will be satisfactory." But if there were some plain and blunt, like the emerald before it is chiselled, there were heroines too. One of these, the first to arrive, seems to have been chosen by God to be the type or form of the future community. This was Marguerite Nazeau, a poor shepherdess that had been guarding her flock. How was it that she deemed it so important to be able to read and write? Her whole thought was of being able to teach her little companions, and for that end she bought a book which she laboured at while minding her flock. When not able to understand something in it, she stopped some one that was passing and asked an explanation. In this way she made progress and began to teach little children, till soon her own village was not sufficient for her zeal, and accompanied by two or three of her pupils, she went from village to village instructing the ignorant, though despised and ridiculed by the people. Notwithstanding she was often in want of everything, yet by economy she found means of aiding towards the education of young students for the priesthood. During one of her journeys she met Saint Vincent, and immediately her virtues expanded. Such was her amiability that she was beloved in the parishes of Saint-Benoit, Saint-Sauveur, and Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs. Her love of the poor was so great that no fatigue wearied her, and it may be said that she died of self-sacrifice. Meeting with a poor woman stricken with the plague, she took her home to her



humble lodging, and while attending to her, fell a victim herself, leaving to all those who came after her a striking example of what a Sister of Charity should be.

It is easier, perhaps, to die through devotedness, as many of Marguerite Nazeau's companions were capable of doing, than to be constantly recollected, amiable, and edifying. It is easier to meet death at a single stroke than to root out all our defects one by one. The Ladies of Charity complained of the education of some, while many, even the best, fresh from their country life, had no idea of meditation or exercises of piety. For the most part isolated as they were, placed away from each other in the different parishes of Paris, without any bond of union, if it happened that one did not succeed, there was scarcely any authority to correct her and to transfer her to another house. This state of things could not last. Saint Vincent felt the absolute necessity of some kind of novitiate, in which they might be trained before serving the poor. To accomplish this, however, a house and a directress should be found.

The house was soon found ; but as to the directress, for a long time Saint Vincent hesitated in his choice. At last he chose Mlle. le Gras, already known to the reader, but with whom it is now necessary to be more fully acquainted.

Mlle. le Gras did not belong to the nobility properly so called. She had therefore no right to be styled Madame. Even when married or as a widow she was only to be addressed as Mademoiselle, like Mlle. du Fay or Mlle. Pollalion. She came of an influential family which by reason of its services and patriotism was in close contact with the nobility. On her father's side she was a Marillac, an old and esteemed family of Auvergne, which gave France just then Marshal Louis de Marillac,

and Michel de Marillac, Keeper of the Seals. Both these reached the highest honours, only to be deprived of them in so tragic a manner. By her mother she was a Camus, niece, it has erroneously been said, of Mgr. Camus, Bishop of Belley, and the friend of Saint Francis de Sales. She was his penitent, however, and for a long time directed by him. Bereft of her mother in her tender years, and soon afterwards of her father, she was confided to her aunt, a nun in the convent of Poissy, and even thus early manifested striking piety. Two traits of this piety deserve notice as being parts of the mysterious and providential preparation of her soul for the great mission destined to be entrusted to her. Called by God to form these heroic women whom He was preparing for the social crisis of modern times, and destined to unite the purity of virgins with the passionate devotedness of mothers, she experienced successively all that was greatest in the two states. When eighteen, inflamed with a love of holy virginity, poverty, and humility, she left Poissy, which she thought too rich for her. Not even content with the fervent Carmelites, she was attracted by the poor Capuchins, who were attracting all in Paris by the austerity and poverty which they practised. Here she would have satiated her love of mortification, but the prudent superior, Father Champigny, advised her to withdraw on account of the feebleness of her health. He regretted losing such a holy soul, but felt that God had great designs in store for her.

In the beginning it was not easy to see these designs. Now that her health had excluded her from religion, her family urged her to marry, which she did on 5th February 1613, at the age of twenty-one. Her husband was Antoine le Gras, Under-Secretary of Mary de Medicis, a young man of good family and solid piety, whom death

snatched away when but a few years married, thus leaving Mlle. le Gras a widow and mother of a child in arms. Here it is that the design of Providence unfolds itself. She, who at one time cherished above all things holy virginity, became a mother, as if God had wished that she should pass through these two states, in order that she might more deeply imprint upon the hearts of her spiritual daughters a love of virginal purity with maternal tenderness.

Saint Vincent, under whose direction we find her from 1626, at first seemed to be principally concerned with restraining her excessive tenderness, disquietude, and motherly solicitude which was too anxious to be spiritual. "As regards your son," he writes, "I shall see him; but be tranquil, I beg of you, since you may feel assured he has the Divine protection, and nothing will injure him. But what must be said of this excessive tenderness? Undoubtedly you must labour to overcome it, as it will injure your spirit of devotion, and rob you of that calm which God so much loves."<sup>1</sup>

And again: "I never saw a mother like you. In the name of God, abandon your child to the care of his heavenly Father, who loves him far more than you do; or at least restrain your over-anxiety."<sup>2</sup> Again: "Oh! how happy it is to be a child of God, who loves His children far more than you do, although you have the greatest affection I have ever seen in a mother. I saw your child yesterday, and I love him more than I can tell you. I do not wish you to yield to that excessively tender affection which is against reason, and consequently against God, who desires that mothers should do their duty towards their children,

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. i. p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 84.

but not sacrifice everything for their sake. We shall discuss this as soon as we meet after the feast.”<sup>1</sup> Mlle. le Gras earnestly wished that her dear child should one day become a priest, and he was only thirteen when she began to turn his thoughts in that direction. Saint Vincent merely listened, and tried to restrain her. “Leave him alone,” he wrote, “and abandon him entirely to the will of God, for it belongs to Him alone to guide such young and tender souls. He has a deeper interest in him than you. When I shall have time to see you or to write, I shall repeat to you what I said one day to Mme. de Chantal on this very subject. It consoled and relieved her, through the mercy of God, of a trial similar to yours.”<sup>2</sup> Mlle. le Gras still persisted; but, alas! which of us realises his early dreams? The older the boy became, the less evident his vocation became. He was pious, but did not wish to be a priest. Saint Vincent seeing this, told it to his mother in the following words: “In reply to your letter, I must inform you that your son has told M. de la Salle that he would only become an ecclesiastic to please you; that he has wished himself dead, but to please you he would take minor orders. Now is this a true vocation? I think he would rather die than wish your death. However this may be, whether his wish be from nature or from Satan, his will is not sufficiently free to decide a point of such importance. Some time ago a youth received the sub-diaconate in the same spirit, and the consequence was he could not be elevated to the other orders. Do you wish to expose your son to a like danger? Leave him to God, who is more his Father than you are his mother, and loves him more than you do. He will call him when He thinks fit, or place him in a state suitable to attain his salvation. I

<sup>1</sup> “Letters,” vol. i. p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 23.

remember a suspended priest who was ordained when his mind was in trouble and doubt, God only knows where he is now. Leave all to God, and resign your will to His. Meditate on our Lord's answer to Zebedee: '*You know not what you ask.*'"<sup>1</sup> After this Mlle. le Gras restrained her eagerness and abandoned the great wish of her life. Her son became a parliamentary lawyer, and marrying Mlle. le Clerc in 1650, continued to lead a most exemplary Christian life.

The ardour which Mlle. le Gras showed with regard to her son manifested itself in everything else. She had a fire of charity in her heart, which the least prospect of doing good fanned, and which might have injured her, were she not constantly restrained and admonished by her holy director to be peaceful and resigned. "In the name of God, love your own helplessness, and remain tranquil. This is the highest honour that you can at present pay our Lord, who is tranquillity itself. Oh! our Lord did well not to select you for His mother, since you cannot honour Him by tranquillity under trying circumstances. Honour, I beg of you, the calm of our Saviour's soul, by a perfect resignation to His holy will."<sup>2</sup> Another day he wrote: "I beg of you to honour the interior desolation of the saints, and especially the Saint of saints, and their closer union with God afterwards. I must say I will blame you to-morrow for yielding to these vain and frivolous fears. Learn to be patient."<sup>3</sup>

This ardent soul was united to an exquisitely sensitive and delicate body. Her constitution was naturally weak. "You are almost like Mlle. le Gras," writes Saint Vincent to a sick priest, "whom I look upon as practically dead for the last ten years. To look at her

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. i. p. 246.  
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<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* p. 442.  
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one would think she came from the tomb, she seems so weak and pale, but God only knows the strength of her mind. Not long ago she made a journey of a hundred leagues, and were it not for her frequent illnesses and the respect she has for obedience, she would often go here and there to visit the sisters and help them.”<sup>1</sup>

Usually such activity of mind leads to precipitation and want of reflection. It was not so with Mlle. le Gras. She had a quick perception, and yet her mind was well balanced. She was especially strong-minded, and her resolution was prompt and not to be recalled. She spoke so charmingly of God and spiritual things, that men concealed themselves in order to listen to her instructions to the sisters. As it often happens, her mind, full of darkness in regard to herself, had great light in discerning the interior of others. She revealed souls to themselves, and they always left her in peace and comfort.

Her only defect as directress and superioress might have been an aspect of severity, seriousness, or even sadness, which at first sight might make her seem difficult of approach. Saint Vincent looked to this point. “Be careful of your health,” he writes, “and honour the serenity of the Sacred Heart. Oh! how I desire this. Now, you must do all you can on your side. Be cheerful, and do what you have to do with a bright spirit.” Another day when she was suffering and speaking of her death, he said: “O Jesus! the time has not yet come. In the name of God, do everything you can to improve, and treat yourself better. If I can, I shall go over to see you this evening; if not, to-morrow, with the help of God. Keep up your spirits in the name of God.” It was always the same expression: “Rejoice

<sup>1</sup> “Letters,” vol. ii, p. 64.

in the Lord"; words which are the consolation of all valiant souls, smothering the grief of this world, and making us joyous in the Lord.

Saint Vincent was not slow to recognise the treasure God had sent him, and he cultivated it like a master. He wrote to her almost daily, and heard her confession weekly. He never left Paris without going to see her, or excusing himself if he could not do so. He directed her retreats and gave her the subjects of her meditations. He took her advice on all matters, and in such an humble and respectful manner, that no sign of superiority, much less of familiarity, appeared, leaving us an inimitable and lasting model of a correspondence between a director and his penitents.

With such material and such a directress we might expect wonders. Saint Vincent wished to begin at once. He went himself to select a house, and chose a very small one in a poor quarter of Paris. This house, which was the cradle of the Sisters of Charity, is still to be seen. Formerly the street was known as Rue des Fossés Saint-Victor, but now as Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine. The house has two small windows in front, a low door and a dark hall. Here Mlle. le Gras entered on November 29, 1633, with four or five sisters carefully selected by Saint Vincent. Notwithstanding the obscurity which surrounds their beginning, and the exact names of those four or five sisters, yet, we may judge of their virtue from the enthusiasm of Mlle. le Gras. Four months had not elapsed before she asked Saint Vincent's permission to bind herself by vow to so holy a work. The saint granted her request, and she thus consecrated herself on March 25, 1634, a day which will remain ever memorable with the Sisters of Charity, and on which every year they renew their vows.

The house being now secured, and the number of postulants increasing, Saint Vincent felt it was time to establish a regular religious training. With this end in view he went every week with M. Portail, or some other confrère, to the humble house in the Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine, and delivered a conference on the virtues necessary for a Sister of Charity. He began with the *Veni Sancte*, and then pointed out the subject of the conference, on which the sisters, informed beforehand, had made their prayer. He asked some of them questions, such as, "Tell us, sister, what reason we have for practising such and such a virtue?" When one sister had finished he asked another, "And you, sister, near the window, have you any other reason to add?" and so on. Saint Vincent listened in this way to ten or fifteen of the sisters giving free expression to their thoughts, and often he commended them, saying, "Oh, how true, my daughter; what a beautiful reason you have adduced! God be praised." Frequently he brought the conference to a close by addressing Mlle. le Gras: "And you, mademoiselle, can you add anything further?" Lastly, the saint reviewed what had been said, dwelling on the important points, and concluded with some practical resolution.

Nothing is so simple, stirring and penetrating as these conferences. It is a father speaking open-heartedly to his children. No searching after effect, no attempt at style, but a simple outpouring of a heart all on fire with charity, radiating darts of the love of God, and uniting self-abasement with a profound knowledge of human nature. The conferences were taken down by Mlle. le Gras or one of the sisters, and are still preserved.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences de Saint Vincent de Paul aux Filles de la Charité*, 2 vols.

We feel we must give some extracts, but how can we select from those two volumes of over a thousand pages, every one of which breathes the spirit of Saint Vincent ? A subject upon which the saint loved especially to dwell was their obscure origin. "A community like yours, destined to so holy and noble an object, so agreeable to our Divine Saviour, and so useful to our neighbour, could certainly have no other author but God Himself ; for until its commencement had any one ever heard of such a work ? Why has God done this ? He did it to serve the poor. We have seen, it is true, religious and hospitals for the assistance of the sick ; but before your establishment there was never a community destined to go and serve the sick in their houses. If, in some poor family, any one fell sick, he was sent to the hospital, and this separated the husband from his wife, and the children from their parents. Until now, O my God ! you had not furnished the means of going to assist them in their houses, and it seemed in a manner as if Thy adorable providence, which never fails, did not extend its watchful care over them. Why, think you, my dear sisters, did God delay in granting this assistance to them ? Oh ! because it was to be reserved to you ; yes, as our sister has very well remarked, you were destined from all eternity for this work, and to be the first to do it. What an advantage, my daughters, for those who are the first to enter an order in the beginning of its establishment, whose first age may be considered its golden age !"<sup>1</sup>

To maintain the sisters in humility, he returned again and again to their lowly origin. "Who are you ? Poor country-girls." "Now, you know, my sisters, that the most of you are poor girls, who have been brought

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences aux Filles de la Charité.*

up in all the simplicity of a rustic life, as well as myself, for you are aware that my occupation in youth was to guard my father's flocks."

And again: "You are for the most part of humble origin. Oh, how great a favour God has bestowed upon you and me, to have chosen us from among the poorest class of people, in order to make use of us! This being really so, does it become us to pretend to be something great, to raise ourselves above what we really are? If the people of the world mistake us and esteem us more than we deserve, should we abuse their estimate of us? I say more: were you even of noble extraction, as some among you are, you should not value yourselves thereon. Was not the Son of God, as man, of royal extraction, and do not you behold Him humbling and abasing Himself, and practising continual mortification? It would be a fine thing, indeed, for a person to come to Paris with the desire, apparently, of serving God, of doing His holy will, and of labouring without ceasing, yet who, on her arrival there, would seek for conveniences which she had not enjoyed in the world, and who would elevate herself above what she really was, forgetting her humble birth, and that her food had hitherto consisted of a little soup, milk, fruit, and rarely of meat. Would not such a thing be worthy of pity! Be assured that the instant you forsake your coarse and simple manner of life, that your dress ceases to be poor and abject, that you wish to change your head-dress and other things which subject you to humiliations, you will begin from that moment to lose the grace of God, and also the esteem in which you have hitherto been held; because by your way of living heretofore, you were considered humble and virtuous. It is on this account that the Ladies of Charity make use of you,



that they love and honour you, and that you are asked for in so many places."

At this point a sister confessed that she had been guilty of many offences on this point. "God be praised, my sister. I beg Him to accept this act of penance in satisfaction for the faults of which you acknowledge yourself guilty. It seems to me that vain-glory ought never to find entrance among you, inasmuch as you are, for the most part, poor country-girls, the children of labourers like myself; in a word, we are nothing. As to the habit and the head-dress which you wear, you have no cause for vanity; neither have you anything to boast of with regard to talent or education. As to nourishment, the poor have as good as you—a little beef, and that is all. You have no cause for self-esteem or presumption; nor to pride yourself on your conversation or manner of speaking, for you seldom frequent any company but that of the poor, who are your masters, and you their servants."

One must be struck with the saint's delicacy of feeling, which never permits him to say, "You are poor, you are only villagers," without adding, "like myself." Humility first, and then tact.

Once more he says to them: "My sisters, I proposed to myself to speak to you on the festival of Saint Geneviève, and as she was a poor village-girl, my design was to entertain you with her virtues and those of other good village-girls, like the first members of the Company. As I was prevented from giving the conference on the day itself, I resolved to do it to-day, on the subject proposed. I will speak willingly to you of the virtues of these good village-girls, on account of the knowledge I have of them, both by experience and by the circumstances of my birth, being myself the child of a poor

labourer, and having lived in the country till the age of fifteen. Our duties for many years were among the country-people, and we may say that there are not many persons who know their manners and understand their way of living better than the Priests of the Mission. I tell you then, that there are none better than those who possess the spirit of these good country-people ; none who are animated with a more lively faith, or who have recourse to God with greater confidence in their necessities, or testify greater gratitude in prosperity. They are extremely simple ; they use no artifice or words of double meaning ; are not obstinate in their own opinion, nor attached to their own judgment, but believe simply all that is said to them. It is in this that you should imitate them.

“These good girls are truly humble ; they do not take complacency or pride in what they possess, or speak of their birth or parentage ; they think not of having more wit or talent than others, but regard all equally and with kindness. Though some among them have more wealth than others, they are not on that account proud and self-sufficient, but act the same towards all. Generally speaking, it is not so with those who have lived in cities, who are continually speaking of their homes, their relations, their conveniences, and even boast very often of having what they really do not possess.

“It is with that simplicity that you must always act, and all should labour to acquire the true spirit of these good village-girls, and endeavour to imitate them in their manner of living. I must say that there are some among you who possess this spirit, and who give me much consolation whenever I see them, particularly when I meet them in the streets carrying a basket to

the sick. I cannot express the joy I feel thereat. Oh ! God be praised !

“These worthy village-girls observe a great frugality at their repasts. They frequently content themselves with bread and soup, though they are continually employed in the most severe labours. It is thus that you must do if you wish to be true Sisters of Charity. Do not think that you are the only ones who have poor and common fare, for in many places the poor rarely have bread to eat. In Limousin they very often have nothing but bread made of chestnuts. In that part of the country from which I came, do you know upon what the good people subsisted for a great part of the year ? They lived upon millet, which they cooked. Oh, how necessary is this frugality for a Sister of Charity !

“These good village-girls, like the great Saint Genevieve, cherish the holy virtue of purity. They never remain alone with men, and never listen to flattery, consequently they are ignorant of what it is to be flattered. Should any one tell one of them that she was beautiful or graceful, her modesty would not be able to bear it, she would not even understand what it meant.

“I must tell you, too, how extremely modest these good village-girls are in their manner and deportment. They keep their eyes modestly cast down, are modest in their dress, which is coarse and plain. Thus should it be with the Sisters of Charity, never entering the dwellings of the rich but when the service of the poor demands it, and even then with great fear ; not amusing themselves with observing what is in these houses, or by speaking to any one they meet, except with great reserve and modesty.

“Oh, how much consoled I am when I meet any

among you who possess this spirit—you especially who are of high condition—going through the streets carrying a basket, and acting with such modesty as to inspire devotion wherever you go ! Yes, there are some among you who excite admiration, and who practise virtue with great generosity.

“ Again, can we behold a greater obedience than that of these good village-girls ? They return from their labour, and if their parents send them back, they go immediately, without regarding the fatigue and weariness they feel, or the rain and mud through which they have to go, and without considering their dress or appearance. Behold how the Sisters of Charity should act. They return at noon from their duties and the service of the poor, to take their repast. If the doctor or the Sister-Servant tells them to take remedies to a sick person, they must do it immediately after their repast, without stopping to consider how they feel or how they look, but go promptly, renouncing themselves and their conveniences to practise obedience, and seeking only the comfort of the sick and not their own. I believe that you are almost all in this disposition.”<sup>1</sup>

Another point upon which he loved to dwell was the service of the poor and its dignity. “ Oh, what a glorious title—Servants of the Poor ! It might as well be said, servants of Jesus Christ, for He regards as done to Himself what is done to the poor. The Pope signs himself ‘ Servant of the servants of God,’ and you, sisters, ‘ Servants of the Sick and Poor,’ who are the well-beloved of our Lord. Oh, how happy are you, sisters, to have been destined by God to so great and holy an employment ! The great ones of the world esteem themselves happy when they can devote a portion of their

<sup>1</sup> *Conférences aux Filles de la Charité*, vol. i. p. 76.

time to the service of the poor; and you can bear testimony—you particularly, our sisters of Saint-Sulpice—with what zeal and fervour those high-born Ladies of Charity accompany you in the good you do. Did not Saint Louis, with a truly admirable humility, devote himself to the service of the poor in the Hôtel-Dieu of Paris, which contributed so much to his sanctification? Did not all the saints likewise consider it an excellent work to render the same service to the poor? Humble yourselves, then, when you exercise this same charity, and often reflect that God has bestowed upon you a favour far above your merits. If for this reason the world honours and esteems you, how much more ought you to admire what God has done for you! I have just seen the Queen, who spoke of you very advantageously; upon which I must observe that you have great reason to fear being unfaithful to God and His grace, if you do not make every effort to observe the Rules which He has given you.”

Not only were the Sisters of Charity to be devoted to the poor from a supernatural motive, but he wished them to be intelligent, active, punctual, obedient to the doctors in their orders, and to regulate everything so as to edify all.

Let us see his practical advice: “You should act, my sisters, with great respect and obedience towards the doctors, taking great care never to condemn or contradict their orders. Endeavour, on the contrary, to fulfil them with great exactitude, and without ever presuming to prepare the medicines according to your own way of thinking. Punctually follow what they have prescribed, both with regard to the quantity of the dose and the ingredients of which it is composed, because upon this fidelity and exactness depends nothing less, perhaps,



than the life of the patient. Respect the doctors, not only because they are more learned and enlightened than you, but because God commands you in the Holy Scripture to do so in the following words: *‘Honour the physicians, for the need thou hast of them. The kings likewise, and all the great ones of the earth, honour them.’* Why should you, my sisters, because you see and converse with them so frequently, fail to show them the honour and respect due to them? You are ignorant of the reasons they have for pursuing different methods in the treatment of maladies which seem to you to be the same. You must endeavour particularly to remember and observe their method of treating the sick, so that when you will be in the villages, or any other place in which there is no doctor, you may render yourselves useful by applying their method. You ought therefore to instruct yourselves, so as to know in what case it is necessary to bleed in the arm or in the foot; what quantity of blood you should take on each occasion; when to apply the cupping-glasses. Learn also the different remedies necessary to be used in the various kinds of diseases, and the proper time and manner of administering them. All this is very necessary for you, and you will do a great deal of good when you are well instructed in it. I think it very essential that you should have some conferences with one another on this subject in the form of catechism.”<sup>1</sup>

Beyond and before the care of the body, Saint Vincent urged the sisters to look to the soul. “Do you think,” he said, “that God has only destined you to carry bread and meat, soup and other remedies to the sick? Oh no, He expects more from you; He wishes you to attend to their spiritual necessities, to give them a heavenly manna, and to communicate to them the Spirit of God.

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences aux Filles de la Charité*, vol. i. p. 76.

“But you will say, We are ignorant; must we then instruct the poor? Yes, and you must not fear to do so; but above all, you must never forget to beg most humbly of God that He will inspire you with what you ought to say, which He will never fail to do. Oh, how beautiful, how touching, to behold with what care you serve the sick, and to hear the words of piety which you address to them, clearly showing that your hearts are filled with the love of God, and that all you do is for the sake of your dear poor! O my daughters, do all in your power to serve them in this manner, and always scruple being with a poor person without giving him some instruction!”

The saint wished that they redouble their zeal at the hour of death. “Take great care to instruct the poor, and teach them how to die well. How consoling, my dear sisters, to aid these good people to reach heaven! Teach them, then, to serve God. Ah, sisters, you can do great things if you are faithful to God.”<sup>1</sup>

In order that they might be the more adapted for employment, Saint Vincent wished that they should be able to read, write, and do some arithmetic. “It is well that you should instruct yourselves, not for the sake of being learned, for science only serves to puff us up, and to swell the mind, filling it with pride. Learn, however, in order to facilitate the means of observing your Rules more exactly; that you may be able to keep a correct account of your expenditure, books, receipts; to write to your superiors from distant places in which you may be; to express your respect and dependence upon them; and above all, to teach the poor little girls of the village—in a word, that you may be able to serve God better.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences aux Filles de la Charité*, vol. i. p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

While Saint Vincent taught his spiritual daughters to visit and assist the poor, he was at the same time grounding them in the virtues of sweetness, humility, modesty, charity and mutual respect, which are the bonds of the religious life. He wished to see them living at home in angelic modesty and the greatest cordiality. "The sisters," said he, "shall remember not to make noise in the house by closing or opening doors, particularly during the night. During recreation they shall converse quietly, striving always to speak in a moderate tone, which is suitable to them and gives edification."<sup>1</sup> "They must manifest their mutual affection and esteem. But some one will say, 'She is only a poor girl.'—Oh! oh! she is one who has been honoured so far as to be sought for by God, and whom, after she had given her consent, He has chosen for His spouse. To what higher dignity can He raise her? If this sister was in the past a young lady of the world, she has now changed her former dress in order to assume the habit of contempt, and to devote herself to God in a state of abjection, humiliation and suffering. She has done this because she believed that God required it of her. Oh! could you witness anything more worthy of esteem?"

"A sister will come from a distance of a hundred or a hundred and twenty leagues, from Flanders, from Holland, in order to consecrate herself to the service of the most abandoned beings in the world. Is not this seeking martyrdom? Yes, without doubt; for one of the Fathers says that 'he is a martyr who, giving himself to God, to serve his neighbour, suffers willingly all that he meets that is difficult and irksome in this employment.'"

We may easily infer that Saint Vincent, who was

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences aux Filles de la Charité*, vol. i. p. 76.

so solicitous for modesty and reserve in the house, was still more anxious for it when the sisters went abroad into the streets. "You ought at all times to be an example of modesty. How would it look to see a Sister of Charity going through the streets like a thoughtless, giddy person, looking about from one side to the other? O my daughters, if you were to act in this way, the world would soon say that sister will in a short time lose her vocation, and if the others follow her example the Company cannot long subsist! I am really edified when I meet any of you in the streets. God be praised! It is with great pleasure and satisfaction that I remember the great modesty of a sister whom I met coming from some place. I inquired of her who the person was to whom she had just spoken. 'Father,' she replied, 'I did not take notice.' My sisters, this is the way you should act, and think of nothing but your duty."<sup>1</sup>

This modesty, so great in the streets, was to be still more so in presence of ecclesiastics. "O sisters, avoid all familiarity with ecclesiastics, and have for them the greatest esteem and respect. Yes, there is nobody for whom we ought to have more reverence than ecclesiastics. The priest at mass changes the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and in the sacraments renders us friends from being enemies of God. Oh, certainly, we cannot have too much respect for the priest. For this reason always speak to them with the greatest modesty, not presuming to raise your eyes in their presence. Respect their holiness and the rank they hold in the Church of God."

On all these questions the saint interrogated the sisters, and from their young and pure hearts received

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences aux Filles de la Charité*, vol. i, p. 76.

answers that delighted him. For example, in the conference on union and disunion, more than thirty sisters spoke, and gave the most profound, and at the same time the most practical, motives for preserving at all costs union of hearts. Again, in the conference on the love of their vocation, it was the same. "I experienced great consolation at the last conference, each one expressed her thoughts so simply and clearly, it seemed to me that the words proceeded from her mouth like sparks of fire issuing from an immense furnace."<sup>1</sup>

To preserve this mutual cordiality, Saint Vincent found the best means was that they should inform one another of their faults. One day while he was speaking on this point, Mlle. le Gras went on her knees and asked to be told her defects. "It would not be just, mademoiselle, that all our sisters should have the happiness of being told of their faults, and that you and I should be the only ones deprived of so great a good, and that we should be so unfortunate as to have no one to practise this charity towards us. There shall then be a sister appointed who will be your assistant, and will hold your place in your absence. She shall receive the complaints which may be brought against you, listen to the faults of which they accuse you, and afterwards tell you of them if she judges it necessary. Behold how this custom is to be observed, and how I practise it myself. I have to complain, however, that he who is appointed to warn and admonish me has not sufficient charity for me, and often passes over very considerable faults which I commit." At another conference he interrogated the sisters on this point. "Mademoiselle, tell us the reason why you should warn

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences aux Filles de la Charité*, vol. i. p. 76.



one another of your faults?"—"Father, it is one of the best means we have of correcting ourselves of our defects. One of our sisters having warned me, as I had begged her to do, I was so proud as to take it very ill. I must humbly ask your pardon—and of you, sister, who performed this act of charity towards me." The other sister in her turn, placing herself on her knees, said, "It is I, sister, who ought to ask pardon of you for not having given you the admonition in the proper manner."—"Oh, how good is this practice!" said our most honoured Father. "The one accuses herself of not having taken the correction well, and the other of not having given it in a proper manner. Rise, sisters," said Saint Vincent, "but the holy custom is to kiss the floor when you accuse yourselves of your faults."

An angelic purity was to complete the portrait of a Sister of Charity. Stationed by Holy Church at the bedside of the dying, she must there be a mother standing over her son; but to have chastity then, she must practise it always.

We may now judge of the virtue Saint Vincent required of the Sister of Charity—virtue of a heroic degree, but without which she could not fulfil her vocation. These virtues had as their source and their object the love of God. "Now, blessed be God, tell me, sister, why a Sister of Charity should love God with her whole heart?"—"Father, it is because He is infinitely good."—"That is true; but why is a Sister of Charity more particularly bound to love God than others?"—"Father, we are bound to love Him in a special manner, since He has drawn us from the world in order to place us in a state in which we have so many means of sanctifying ourselves. For my part, I am covered with confusion when I consider how little

profit I derive from so many graces, but I am firmly resolved to be more on my guard for the future.”—“Sister, by what marks can you know that you love God?”—“Father, it is when we feel a great desire to please Him.”—“Ah, sister, that is indeed a certain mark, for if we have a great desire to please Him, not only shall we avoid offending Him, but we shall likewise study to accomplish His will in all things. How may we know that a Sister of Charity loves God?”—“Father, when we see her faithful in observing His holy commandments.”<sup>1</sup>

In this manner were all the conferences carried out. The sisters spoke in turn, and their remarks evoked beautiful sentiments from the saint. Yet in Saint Vincent there were no extremes. He wished to see the sisters burning with the love of God, but free, detached from everything, always ready to leave all, even their exercises of piety, their prayer, their very communions, to attend to the wants of the poor. “Do without delay whatever regards the service of the poor, and if, instead of making your meditation in the morning, you have to carry the remedies to the sick, go in contentment and peace. Oh! what a consolation for a good Sister of Charity to reflect and say to herself, ‘Instead of making my meditation or spiritual reading, I go to assist the poor sick who need my care so much, and I know that this action will be most agreeable to God.’ Oh! with this thought a sister goes cheerfully wherever God calls her.”<sup>2</sup>

What a well-ordered mind! Here is the true religion of which Saint James speaks—“*Religion pure and unspotted with God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their tribulation, and to keep one’s self*

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences aux Filles de la Charité*, vol. i. p. 404.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

undefiled from this world." In forming the Sisters of Charity he was forming all servants of the poor.

Often during these conferences the saint seemed lost in God, repeating a phrase twice or thrice, as if he could not restrain himself. Or again, joining his hands, he would exclaim with rapturous devotion: "My God, my God, my Saviour, my good Saviour!"

The conference closed with the saint's blessing. This was a privilege for the sisters, but a martyrdom for the humble man of God. "What," he would say, "a miserable sinner like me to bless souls so holy as you!" Sometimes, however, striking his breast, he submitted to their request and gave his blessing. "May Almighty God be pleased to shed abundantly upon you His own Spirit, which is that of love, meekness, sweetness, and charity. I, though so destitute of all virtues, especially of meekness and gentleness, will not hesitate to pronounce over you the words of benediction, placing all my confidence in His infinite mercy." Another day, after a conference on labour, he said: "I beg of God, who has laboured from all eternity within Himself; I beg our Lord, who laboured from His youth, to pardon us all our loss of time, and particularly myself, who am unworthy of the bread I eat. I entreat Him to grant us the grace of sanctifying ourselves by our labours." Sometimes he positively refused to give his blessing. "I pray God, dear sisters, that He may pardon you all the faults you have committed. Wretch that I am, who do not keep my own rules, I beg pardon of Him, and of you also, sisters. How many faults have I not committed in your regard, and in that which concerns your work? I beg you to entreat of God that He may be merciful to me, and on account of my unworthiness I will ask our Lord Jesus Christ to give

you His holy benediction Himself, and I will not pronounce the words to-day. I therefore beg of our Lord to do it."

Here Saint Vincent kissed the floor; but Mlle. le Gras and all the sisters, greatly afflicted that their Father should refuse to give them his blessing, entreated him with so much earnestness, that at last he granted their request.

"Pray to God then, my sisters, that He may not regard my unworthiness, nor the sins of which I am guilty, but that He may show mercy to me; and now may He shed His benedictions upon you while I pronounce the words."

How such teaching warmed the young and tender hearts of the sisters! How it penetrated through the walls and attracted numbers to join them! They came from all sides, filling the humble house in the Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine. In vain did Mlle. le Gras utilise every nook and corner. Even in the corridors she had beds put up. In the end, however, it was necessary to leave that first and cherished cradle of the Company. On May 17, 1636, Mlle. le Gras with her sisters settled near the chapel Saint-Denis, which had the great advantage of being beside Saint-Lazare, where Saint Vincent was. The contract was signed by Mme. Goussault, who was becoming every day a greater friend and benefactress of the sisters. Already she was suffering from the malady that was to cause her death, and was manifesting under it the greatest sweetness, patience and resignation to the holy will of God. "O my God," writes Saint Vincent of her to Mlle. le Gras, "how sweet and firm is her submission to the will of God! It is nothing to have seen her in health in comparison to have seen her in death."

Assisted by Saint Vincent de Paul, nursed by Mlle. le Gras and the Sisters of Charity, whom she loved so much, this great soul had only one regret when about to die, that she had not long ago left all, noble lady though she was, to enter the humble Company of the Servants of the Poor. Perhaps it was to augment her regret, or perhaps to recompense her devotedness to them, that God showed her, the night before her death, the future glory of the Sisters of Charity. "O my daughters, I must tell you that Mme. Goussault, who was a great servant of God, a holy soul, who loved your Company very much, said to me the night before she died: 'Ah, Father, how my mind was occupied with these good sisters this night! If you only knew how much I think of them! Oh, they will do great things!'"—"Yes," added Saint Vincent, "provided they are faithful." <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Conferences aux Filles de la Charité*, vol. i. pp. 184-261.



## CHAPTER III

SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL EMPLOYS LAYMEN IN THE SERVICE OF THE POOR—THE SISTERS OF CHARITY  
(*continued*)

1633-1642

HERE then were two great armies raised up by Saint Vincent for the service of the poor: the ladies of the world, with all their influence, their name and their wealth; and the Sisters of Charity, with all their purity and heroic devotedness. Our saint, however, was labouring to form a third, a more difficult work, no doubt, but not less beautiful—the association for laymen. In works of charity a woman possesses more tenderness and sympathy, a man more authority and influence. His example strikes more forcibly, and there are some miseries he alone can undertake to cure. Moreover, every available force was called for, to combat the appalling misery we are about to narrate. For all these reasons Saint Vincent multiplied his efforts, in order that around the standard of charity might be grouped as many as possible who should become servants of the poor.

Saint Vincent's first endeavours in this direction date from his curacy in Châtillon-les-Dombes. The ladies' rules are dated 1617; those for men, Amiens, 1620. Was that the first? Had he not established an association for men at Clichy and Châtillon? In any case, to start from 1620, he began to multiply these associations: at

Folleville, Montmirail, Joigny and Trévoux. Mâcon preserves the date of its foundation as 1623. Many autograph copies of these rules are found, almost written in the same terms, and fully expressing the saint's plans.

The association is a Christian one, having Jesus Christ, the Father of the poor, for its Patron. It is presided over by the curé, without whom neither the association for gentlemen nor that for ladies can do anything. Everybody is free to join, but thirty of the most zealous members are chosen to act as the pillars of the associations. From them are selected a president, treasurer, and visitor. The end of the association is to realise these words of Deuteronomy, "*Let there be no poor among you.*" As a matter of fact, in a well-organised town or city there could not and should not be poor. If the poor were healthy, they ought to work, and the association should find it for them. If they were sick, too young, or not able to earn all, then the association should supply what was wanting. Finally, in the case of confirmed invalids the association should distribute weekly what was necessary for each. If this were the case there should be an end to begging. Our Lord has said, no doubt, "There shall always be poor among you;" but He has not said, "*There shall always be beggars.*" Poverty is in the order of Divine Providence; begging is a disgrace to society. It is the mother of every vice, and a menace to civilisation itself.

We have seen how Saint Vincent adapted these associations to the resources of the places in which he established them. We shall not repeat these instructions here, but simply show the care he wished to be bestowed upon the soul even more than upon the body. "They shall see," he says, "that the children go to school, be

taught their catechism, and brought to confession; that the people be well instructed in their religion, and that they approach the sacraments. Heretics shall be brought back to the truth; but if they remain obstinate, is that any reason for not admitting them to the hospital or refusing them aid?" Michelet misrepresented the saint on this point. "What is astonishing," he says, "is, that having so tender a heart, yet he forgot his priestly character, and made a confession of faith a condition to receive assistance. But why? If a starving man is a Lutheran or a Calvinist, must he die? Must he abjure his belief to receive support?"<sup>1</sup> M. Feillet, a man of deep learning and nobility of character, who accepted this unfounded accusation, retracted it in his work entitled *The Misery at the Time of the Fronde*. This is his retraction: "We take this opportunity to apologise for our accusation of intolerance against Saint Vincent de Paul in our work *Revue de Paris*. It arose from a quotation; but a more serious study of the period, and a more intimate acquaintance with the work and letters of the saint, have convinced us that he never inquired of what religion a man was. On this account we declare our criticisms of 1856 were more specious than solid, and we unreservedly retract them from no other motive than respect and love of truth."<sup>2</sup> The fact is that this saintly priest wished that in giving aid to all, some might be brought to know the truth, and all to virtue.

In order that the members of the associations should never lose courage nor recoil before fatigue or danger, the saint wished that they should raise their minds above the poor, and see in them the suffering members of our Lord; that they should remember that the least service

<sup>1</sup> *Histoire de France*, vol. xii.

<sup>2</sup> *La Misère au temps de la Fronde*.

done to them was done to Him. In reciting the litany his voice was noticed to tremble at the words, "*Jesu pater pauperum.*"

Such are the characteristics of the association of laymen formed to serve the poor. It responded so well to the demands of the time that it spread with wonderful rapidity, not only to Folleville, Montmirail, Joigny, Trévoux, Mâçon, and more than thirty parishes, but even extended to Lorraine, Champagne, and Burgundy.

Its success was still greater in Paris. Now that Saint Vincent was established in Saint-Lazare, he did not neglect so grand a work, but utilised the opportunity the surrounding gentry afforded him, and interested them in the service of the poor.

Among these distinguished persons we must place in the first rank Baron de Renty, one of the noblest characters, not only of the seventeenth, but of any century.

Baron de Renty was born in the castle of Berry, in the diocese of Bayeux, in 1611. After brilliant studies at Bayeux and Paris, being opposed by his father in a desire to become a Carthusian, he married, at the age of twenty-two, Mlle. d'Entragues, a noble and virtuous young lady, by whom he had five children—two sons and three daughters. Like all his race, he was a soldier, but as remarkable for his piety as for his courage. A gentleman challenging him to a duel, he replied that God and his King prevented him from accepting his challenge; but that should he attack him, he would make him repent. The gentleman did attack him, with the result that Baron de Renty wounded, disarmed, and compelled him to surrender his sword. Then, as his only vengeance, he brought him to his house, staunched his wounds, and returned his sword. This shows what

blood was in his veins; but soon his humility endeavoured to hide his brilliant qualities. He concealed his nobility, abandoned his titles, threw off his insignia, and when Louis XIV. offered to make him a councillor, he so humbly refused, that instead of his refusal hurting the King, his virtue evoked his profoundest admiration. Henceforth he entirely devoted himself to the poor, and made his castle a hospital, where, with his wife and daughters, he served them. In Paris, Dijon, Baume, wherever he was, he spent two or three hours in the Hôtel-Dieu. In his visits to the Blessed Sacrament he manifested such faith and recollection, that, without his knowing it, the Ladies of Charity, the Sisters of Charity and the invalids came to watch him. To render his charity more useful, he had studied medicine, and could compound the ordinary prescriptions. No ulcer affrighted him; on the contrary, the more repulsive the more attractive to him. He was ever attending the poor, and adoring in them Jesus Christ. Could Saint Vincent wish for a more courageous and active helper? One day Baron de Renty met a Sister of Charity returning from visiting a sick person. "Where are you coming from, sister?" said he. "I was visiting Jesus Christ," she replied. "And so am I," said he. He assisted our saint in all his works, and took part in everything he was doing within the kingdom—the seminaries, the prisoners, the outcasts, the Hôtel-Dieu, the foundlings; and even outside of France, by assisting missions in Algiers, Tunis, Madagascar, Ireland, England, and Scotland. He was the right hand of Saint Vincent, and died at the age of thirty-seven, amid universal admiration at his accomplishing so much in so short a time.<sup>1</sup>

By his side we must place Henri-Michel Buche, a

<sup>1</sup> *Vie de M. de Renty.*



poor shoemaker, but a man of great intelligence, who undertook to reform all those of his class. For this end he founded two institutions, one for shoemakers and the other for tailors, which continued to exist down to the Revolution.

In the next place comes Commander de Sillery, who, having been Ambassador in Italy and Spain, and Commander of the Knights of Malta, urged by divine grace, devoted himself, under the direction of Saint Vincent, to the service of the poor. He sold all he possessed, left his grand residence, and aiming at perfection, humbly became a priest, and always continued to refuse any higher dignity in the Church. Letters of Saint Chantal and of Saint Vincent to him are as beautiful a testimony of his virtue as any servant of God might desire. "His death," writes Saint Vincent, "corresponded with his noble life. He entered heaven like a monarch about to take possession of his kingdom, in a peace and confidence that cannot be described."<sup>1</sup>

In the first rank of these gentlemen of the world must be named the two Marillacs (uncles of Mlle. le Gras), the Duke of Liancourt, the Marquis of Fénelon, M. Sublet des Noyers (Secretary of State), M. Dufour, and a large number of others whom it would be impossible to mention here.

Urged on by such example, and under the influence of Saint Vincent de Paul, laymen might be seen co-operating in every work of charity. "Would you believe," writes our saint, "that persons of both sexes, and of the highest society in Paris, are visiting, instructing, and exhorting the sick in the Hôtel-Dieu every day, and this, too, with the most admirable devotion and perseverance. They who have not seen it for themselves can scarcely

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. i.

credit it, and those who witness it are greatly edified, for, in truth, it is the life of saints serving our Lord in His suffering members."

While some were looking after the interests of those in the Hôtel-Dieu, others were engaged with prisoners, or aiding and consoling the outcasts. "At the head of this group are M. de Morangis, the Marquis de Laval, the Marquis d'Urfé, Viscount d'Argenson, MM. de Lavan, d'Ornano, Talon, and Du Belloy. They visit the prisons and investigate the cases, releasing those who deserve it. The King contributed a large annuity, and the Archbishop of Paris ransomed every Palm Sunday a prisoner recommended by the association."<sup>1</sup>

As in Paris, so in the large towns, associations of laymen were formed for the service of the poor. "Baron de Renty has established here (Caen) many associations, which meet every week and consult how the poor may best be assisted. Similar reports come from Burgundy and Amiens, where, through his example and influence, many generous-hearted persons joined and laboured with great fruit in the service of the poor." He wrote on one occasion to a superior of a mission-house, "If you think I could establish the association of laymen in your town, I shall do my utmost to go there, but I believe I shall do more harm than good." Following the example of Saint Vincent, wherever he founded the association he left a copy of the rules, drawn up unquestionably by our saint in Paris. The other gentlemen of the associations followed the example of Baron de Renty, and a holy enthusiasm for serving the poor spread throughout France.

What had been begun in Paris, and continued in the provinces, Saint Vincent wished to see completed by the

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. ii.

lords and gentry who possessed large estates. "Whoever," says he, "owns a great property has received from God an obligation to watch over the souls under him, and is responsible in proportion to the extent of his authority. Let him take care especially of the poor, the orphan, and the abandoned, it is his duty ; but let him not forget the others, for all are committed to his charge." That these truths, too often forgotten by the upper classes, might be the better known and practised, the saint propagated a pamphlet, which he styled *How to Assist the Poor*, but which might more appropriately be called *The Duties of Lords to their Tenantry*. Here are some extracts :—

"The great commandment of Christianity is to love God and our neighbour, and the Christian shows himself worthy of so great a name when he practises charity towards the wretched and miserable. This obligation of charity is binding on all, but more particularly on those who possess the good things of earth. If they have a right to possess and receive, they are likewise bound to assist those in necessity. Very true is that which a great Father of the Church has said : 'He is a murderer who does not assist the poor when he is able—*Non pavisti, occidisti.*' Those, therefore, who in the present necessity are anxious to acquit themselves of this duty towards the poor, may use with advantage this little pamphlet, which has already served some, illustrious alike by their piety and by their birth. In the first place, it is only right that the lord of the place should visit the poor, and see for himself their state, noting the name and age of the parents, and the number and age of their children. If the poor are sick, he should adopt means to cure them, and failing the presence of the Association of Charity, he should send a doctor to prescribe

suitable remedies. As regards nourishment, twice a week half a pound of meat and a pound of bread should be sent for each sick person. When those poor people can work, he should find it for them on his own estate when it is difficult to get it elsewhere. When he happens to discover an orphan or a foundling, he must take particular care of its education, religious instruction, and nourishment. The same spirit of God which moves him to assist the poor ought likewise to make him solicitous for the churches and pastors within his sphere of influence. Again, the same spirit should make him vigilant with the justices to suppress crime and encourage good order, to settle lawsuits and disputes, to forbid blasphemies, to prevent, as much as possible, taverns, to punish drunkards and prohibit the sale of drink during church time, to correct and remove abandoned women; in fine, to do everything that may tend to the better service of God."

This was the advice Saint Vincent gave to the lords and gentry of the seventeenth century. To his mind a lord was a petty king, and a minister of God to do good. The times have changed, and so has the social condition of the classes, but their duties to each other remain the same. The successors of these great lords are gravely culpable if they do not feel bound by the same obligations, all the more pressing now on account of the troubled spirit that is abroad.

Political events were adding to the ordinary miseries new misfortunes still more worthy of tears. Saint Vincent learned from Baron de Renty that many of the nobility of Lorraine were to be found in the garrets of Paris. These unfortunate persons, stript of their property, driven from their homes by the war, and justly ashamed of their downfall, were living in extreme poverty, nay,

some even dying of want. At the suggestion of Saint Vincent, the laymen's assembly voted the necessary funds, and directed some of their members, with Baron de Renty at their head, to seek out these unhappy noblemen. They discovered a heart-breaking sight. "On their report being given, the assembly renewed the grant for another month. This month passed, and they returned to Saint-Lazare to bind themselves for a third, and thus it was month after month for twenty years, during which their charity was kept burning by the zeal of Saint Vincent de Paul."<sup>1</sup>

About this time there were flocking into Paris large numbers of nobility, priests and religious of both sexes, who had been forced to leave England, Ireland and Scotland in consequence of the religious and political agitation which ended in the beheading of Charles I. Could they be abandoned? If even debt was to be incurred, was it not a duty as Christians and as men of honour to come to their help? The assembly undertook their relief, and as usual Baron de Renty was in the van. "Every month he went on foot through the most remote quarters of Paris, which he had chosen to mortify himself all the more, and there he distributed aid. According to the custom and advice of Saint Vincent he graciously saluted the refugees on entering, and then with an admirable delicacy of feeling asked them to accept their monthly allowance. He remarked to his companion one day, 'Behold true Christians, who have left all for God. What are we in comparison, who have lost nothing and want for nothing? They are content with two crowns a month, after possessing fifteen or twenty thousand livres a year, and even suffer their loss with patience and resignation. We, who have abundance, are chary of

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iv.



our charity. Ah! sir, it is not in signs nor in words, but in the heart and in deeds, that Christianity consists.'"<sup>1</sup>

Although the assembly of laymen was composed of rich lords, yet so great was the demand, that money was often wanting at the beginning of the month. Happily Saint Vincent was always ready to replenish their purse. "M. Vincent," writes one of the members, "was always the first to contribute. He opened his heart and his purse, depriving himself even of necessities in order to complete a good work. On one occasion, to make up the required amount, three hundred livres were necessary. Saint Vincent at once gave them, though it was known that the sum was a gift he had just received to buy another horse, for the one he had was too old and wretched to hold out any longer. But he preferred to suffer inconvenience, and even danger, than see people in want and not relieve them." In similar circumstances on another occasion two hundred livres were required. Saint Vincent asked the bursar how much he had in the office? He replied, "Merely what is necessary for the community to-morrow, for you know, sir, we are now becoming numerous."—"But tell me exactly how much you have."—"Fifty crowns."—"What! Is there no more in the house?"—"No, sir, positively no more."—"Well, even so, get them." The bursar brought the fifty crowns to Saint Vincent, who handed them over at once to the assembly to make up the balance of their monthly charities. Without any anxiety he abandoned himself and his priests to Divine Providence. He was not deceived. Kind Providence, as a matter of fact, came to his rescue in the person of a rich lord who had heard and seen all. This man sent the

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. iv.

next day to Saint-Lazare a purse containing a thousand francs.

At the same time that the saint was procuring pecuniary aid for the members of the assembly, he was also sustaining their courage, enlivening their faith, and at their spiritual retreats in Saint-Lazare addressing them in burning words of zeal and charity. He often had them to make short retreats, for he knew that there was nothing so stimulating for souls. "It was a wonderful and edifying sight," writes Abelly, "to see in the same refectory, lords, viscounts, marquises, barristers, judges, merchants, soldiers, artisans, and even footmen. All were welcome to make their retreat in this great hospice of charity."

"It is computed," continues Abelly, "that the house of Saint-Lazare alone received annually from seven to eight hundred persons to make a retreat. The other houses of the Congregation of the Mission likewise received them, and particularly the house in Rome, where many were always to be found. From 1635 to the death of Saint Vincent, twenty-five years afterwards, the number who made retreats is estimated at over twenty thousand."<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible to estimate the good these exercises produced. What extraordinary conversions! How many, naturally inclined to evil, were totally changed! "I recommend to your prayers," writes Saint Vincent, "a certain person who is in retreat, and who unquestionably is capable of doing a great deal of good, if he is entirely converted to God; while, on the contrary, if he is not converted, there is great reason to fear he will do much evil."

On another occasion he wrote: "We have in retreat

<sup>1</sup> Abelly, vol. i.

a captain who wishes to become a Carthusian, and was sent here to test his vocation. I beg of you to recommend him to our Lord, and to reflect on His goodness in inspiring a person with such a change of life."

"We have also another captain, for whom too we beg your prayers, as likewise for a convert who labours hard by writing to win over others. May God be praised for all. O God! how beautiful are the workings of your Holy Spirit, and how strong is grace, that so many men should have come from all parts to mortify themselves. A spiritual retreat is indeed to crucify the flesh, and in it we may say with the Apostle, '*I am crucified to the world, and the world is crucified to me.*'"

Thus at the bidding of Saint Vincent, and under his direction, laymen were ranging themselves under the banner of charity. They were placing their influence and their wealth at the service of the poor, and endeavouring to become more Christian in order to become more devoted. They were laying the foundation of that grand "Society of Saint Vincent de Paul," which is sometimes thought a birth of our day, but is in reality a revival of this great movement of charity.

While Saint Vincent was endeavouring to inspire the Sisters of Charity with the spirit with which he wished to see them animated, he was slowly unfolding to them the constitution which he contemplated giving them. That constitution was singularly courageous. It took our saint more than twenty years to conquer public opinion, the objections of the King and Parliament, and the prudent hesitation of the Pope and Cardinals. It is true now, however, that that constitution, after having been an object of wonder to the world, has become an object of admiration. Here is its fundamental idea.

Up to that time, when a maiden wished to consecrate

herself to God, she entered an enclosure, which, in the troubled state of society in the Middle Ages, gave her complete security. After her novitiate she made solemn vows, and these were recognised by the State, so that she could not validly marry, inherit or bequeath property, nor return to the world, and was thus strengthened in her resolution. The Church accepted and exalted these State regulations. The cloister was made venerable, as a holy and happy sanctuary. The grill that concealed these maidens was a voluntary prison, but a prison of love, in which God held captive souls that He had chosen for Himself. These vows were the nails that bound them with Jesus on the cross for the salvation of the world, and the virgin consecrated to God was a voluntary and living oblation for the sins of men, and a shining light for society.

Hence as the Sisters of Charity began to be formed, the grand ideal of the religious state rose up before their minds.

Why should not they, too, have vows? Why not add to their good works the happiness and the merit of being irrevocably consecrated to God by vows? Saint Vincent heard all this, but turned a deaf ear. Were those vows to be simple or solemn? According to the laws of Church and State, solemn vows necessitated strict enclosure. What then would become of the service of the poor? If the vows were simple, yet perpetual, how inconvenient it would be! How could young ladies, bound by perpetual vows, but not protected by the civil power, be sent into the poor garrets of Paris? They might abandon their vocation, validly marry, and become a scandal to society and a temptation to religious. For these reasons Saint Francis de Sales had been prevailed upon to modify so much the Rule of the Visitation.

Saint Francis de Sales had yielded, and like a great painter forced to abandon a noble conception, realised another no less grand. But since his time twenty years had gone by, and the absolute necessity of the service of the poor by sisters consecrated to God had become more evident. Saint Vincent had decided not to yield. Either his spiritual daughters should have no vows, or such as admitted of visiting the poor. He loved, he venerated the cloister, but that was not what he wanted. The door of the convent which he contemplated was to be open day and night, and that is the grand characteristic of the constitution of the Sisters of Charity.

"At first," says Saint Vincent, "it was thought proper that the name of Association should continue, fearing that if instead of it you were to be called a Congregation, there might be some among you who in some future time would wish to change the house into a cloister, and become religious, as the Daughters of St. Marie have done.<sup>1</sup> God has permitted that poor country-girls should succeed those ladies, and it is to be feared that in the course of time some weak and ill-disposed minds may wish to introduce some change in your Company, either in your customs or manner of life—in your head-dress, for example, saying, 'What! to be dressed in this manner, to wear such a head-dress when we go to visit the poor? Really it is ridiculous! we must have something different to wear on the head, and a handkerchief for the neck, that we may be better covered.' O sisters! if ever they should wish to persuade you to introduce these changes, reject their proposals, and answer boldly that you wish to obtain the crown which God had promised to the Daughters of St. Marie. You are not religious in the proper sense. Be firm then, and permit no

<sup>1</sup> "Conferences," vol. ii.



change. Religious must needs have a cloister, but the Sisters of Charity must go everywhere.”<sup>1</sup> To emphasise this point the saint wished that the word cloister should not be used to designate their houses. “No other monastery,” said he, “than the house of the sick, no other chapel than the parish church.” Likewise, he wished them to retain their secular dress. “O my daughters, who could have given to the Church a Company of Sisters of Charity in secular costume?” Again, in the approbation of their rules, it is said, “The Sisters of Charity, by a holy inspiration, have resolved to live in community, retaining, however, their secular dress.”

Their costume was that of the ordinary women of the environs of Paris. A grey habit, and a large white head-dress, known as the *cornette*, was their simple attire. Some thought that a veil was required, but to this Saint Vincent replied, “Modesty is their veil.”

To perfectly adapt the new institution to its work, Saint Vincent not only discarded solemn vows that required the enclosure, not only passed over perpetual vows, such as they were, but merely asked the Sister of Charity to bind herself from year to year. Perhaps if he had been free he should have required none, and so allow their devotedness its full liberty. “You shall make it a practice then, sisters, to go to the Bishop, ask his blessing, and testify your obedience to him and your devotion to the poor. You shall say that you are not religious in the strict sense, but vow poverty, chastity, and obedience for one year.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite all opposition the saint created this new type of servants of God in the service of His poor. “The Sister of Charity shall have for her convent the house

<sup>1</sup> “Conferences,” vol. ii.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

of the sick, for her cell the chamber of suffering, for her chapel the parish church, for her cloister the streets of the city or the wards of an hospital. Obedience shall be her enclosure, the fear of God her grate, and modesty her veil.”<sup>1</sup>

Providence blessed this courageous undertaking. Not only the Sisters of Charity, but almost all the religious orders of women for the last three hundred years have adopted this rule and given to the world a spectacle unintelligible to human wisdom. Each year many thousand religious in France and throughout the world are free, their vows end with a day.<sup>2</sup> Picture such a spectacle—thousands of religious free to return to the world, to marry if they choose, and yet on the morrow at holy mass they freely and willingly put on again these chains, which of themselves fell off, without even an effort on the part of their captives. What say you now, calumniators of the religious life?

This courageous undertaking, though it had succeeded so well, was open, nevertheless, to many dangers, and of these Saint Vincent frequently spoke to his spiritual daughters. Often he said: “You are not religious in the strict sense, and can never be, because of the service of the poor. You must therefore even be holier than religious, since you have greater temptations and less security; if you are not truly holy, you shall certainly be lost.” Again: “You have no grate to shut you off from the dangers of the world; you must erect one in your own interior, which will be far better. Learn well your rule which says, ‘The Sister of Charity shall have for enclosure

<sup>1</sup> Regles.

<sup>2</sup> On 25th March of each year every Sister of Charity is free, so that she may renew her vows or not.

the virtue of obedience.’” One day as he was asking the sisters to express their opinions on this subject, one of them said : “ Father, as religious have their cloister, and we have not, obedience is all the more necessary for us, otherwise we shall be exposed to the great danger of committing many faults.”—“ Ah, my God ! that is well said. Oh, how true it is ! Well, then, sister, you think that by means of obedience you ought to be as recollected and reserved as religious within their cloister ?”—“ Yes, Father, and although we are not enclosed, we do not cease on that account to be as much obliged to practise obedience as nuns.”—“ So that, sisters, obedience is your enclosure. How edifying it is to see a Sister of Charity serving the sick in a public parish, and yet leading the life of a cloistered religious ! If this sister were guided by her own will, and lived in a state of independence, she would make no difficulty to go sometimes to one place, and then to another, to make visits ; to go to the house of a lady of her acquaintance or of a relation, or to stop longer than would be necessary in the places to which she should have to go. Holy obedience prevents all this ; she goes only to those places in which her services are needed, and therefore she does not lose her time in useless visits. Was it not this you meant, sister, when you said that religious have their cloisters, but that the Sisters of Charity have none but obedience ?”—“ Yes, sir.”—“ And do you think that you can lead as holy a life as a religious within her enclosure ?”—“ Yes, Father.”—“ Yes, sisters, doubt it not ; and be assured that there is nothing more edifying to behold, nothing more agreeable to God, more admirable in the sight of angels and of men, nor a spectacle more worthy of exciting wonder and astonishment, than to see poor Sisters of

Charity in hired rooms, or the wards of hospitals, exposed to the gaze and remarks of those who know nothing of their manner of life. Thus they manifest their submission and obedience in such a manner, that it may be said in truth, that they never do their own will, because they never do anything but through obedience. Oh yes, if you act in a spirit of obedience, there can scarcely be anything greater than what you do, nor can religious shut up in a cloister all their lives do more than you. Persons of the world must under no circumstances whatever enter the apartments of the Sisters of Charity, except the parlour or reception room. This must be observed, no matter how high the person may be—not even the confessor.”

By such wise and firm precautions did Saint Vincent create a new form of the religious life without prejudice to the old. Nay, he rather let loose the waters and multiplied the harvest, as when some river overflows and fructifies the land all around.

Nine years had already gone by, and if we except Mlle. le Gras, none of the sisters had been permitted by Saint Vincent to consecrate themselves to God by vow, even for a year. Always prudent, and an enemy of haste, he at length chose four sisters, whom he permitted to consecrate themselves by vow on March 25, 1642.

Who were these privileged ones it is difficult to say. Two at least are known, Sister Barbe Engiboust and Sister Jeanne Dallemagne. We can only surmise the others. Sister Barbe Engiboust was, properly speaking, the first Sister of Charity. Born near Chartres, of the farming class, she was courageous and strong. We do not know where she excelled, whether in her tenderness towards the foundlings, holding them even for

nights in her arms, when cradles were wanting, or in her patience with the galley-slaves, under their insults and injuries, or finally in appeasing the warders about to chastise the convicts. No difficulty made her lose courage. When some laymen of distinction wished to see the sisters' apartments, Sister Barbe was inflexible, and held her ground against all opposition. Under other circumstances she was likewise admirable, and always won the highest esteem from Saint Vincent. At his bidding she was ready to go to the ends of the earth. When she died she looked so beautiful that the people accused the sisters of having painted her.

Marguerite Laurence, who entered shortly after Sister Barbe, and was undoubtedly one of the first group, was of a very different nature. Lively, of a playful disposition, as she went along through the streets and saw the gaiety around her she had to press the crucifix to her heart, in order not to stop and look on. "You are more beautiful than all," she said to herself while clasping her cross, and then she passed on. She was generous, and capable of any sacrifice, and her delight in receiving the sister's habit was unbounded. Her mother wrote to her the following letter on the occasion: "My child, I am greatly consoled to learn of the joy you felt in changing your worldly dress for the habit of poverty and of a servant of Christ. It will adorn you more than the satin and silk of the world, when your soul is possessed of the virtues of penance, humility, obedience, and, above all, a holy love and fear of God. Love with your whole heart that enslavement in the service of the poor which you have chosen at the feet of Jesus crucified for the remainder of your life. Ever remember your first fervour, and when it cools, go to our Lord and rekindle that fire in your heart which was burning so brightly



when you left your father and me. Ah! how happy I should be to have borne in my womb a child whom I shall one day see crowned in heaven, for having, like her Saviour Jesus Christ, wished to be despised and contemned, and to suffer in body and mind." Holiness is easy with such a mother.

We must reckon among these first sisters, although it is not known that she was one of the four, Anne de Geunes. She was the first Sister of Charity of noble extraction that entered the Congregation, but her humility surpassed her nobility. To allude to her high birth was to mortify her. She rejoiced among the poor, whom she served as she would have served Jesus Christ. Such was her delight in being with them that she often said she preferred to meet the poor than her relatives.

Marie Lullen was another worthy of mention. She adored Jesus Christ in the poor, and kissed the feet of the orphan child as if it were the Infant Jesus.

We might name many others, but must hasten on to Jeanne Dallemagne, who, with Barbe Engiboust, was certainly one of the four who consecrated themselves by vow on March 25, 1642. Having entered in 1638, she was thus only a few years in the Company. The Carmelites were anxious they should possess this innocent soul, and the Princess de Condé would have enabled her to join any convent she liked; but she entered the Sisters of Charity, in order to serve the poor. She died quite young, in the odour of sanctity, worn out by fatigue and devotion to the poor. "Oh! how virtuous, sisters," Saint Vincent used to say in speaking of her. "In that sister we had a great treasure. Oh! what a loss, and God grant that it is not my sins, wretch that I am, that are the cause of it all." What struck our saint most about this sister was her profound humility and extra-

ordinary tact. She used to say of herself, "I can do nothing well." Everything, however, she undertook through obedience had exceptional success, and a sister who worked with her for eighteen months declared that she could not discover in her the slightest imperfection.

When she was attacked by a serious malady which caused her death, she said she had only one regret, and that was that she had not served the poor enough, and that if God spared her she would try to do more for them in future. During her last illness she tried to speak to the sisters and say how happy they were to be able to serve the poor, and she hoped that they would do it better than she. This was said only through humility, for she had infinite tenderness towards the poor. One day she asked a sister for some bread to give to a beggar, and on receiving a hard crust, she said, "O sister! that will do for me, but we must give nothing to God but the best."

"The last time I saw her," says Saint Vincent, "I asked her, 'Which would you now prefer to have been, a Sister of Charity or a great lady of the world?'—'Oh!' she replied, 'a Sister of Charity.' A beautiful sentiment, my dear sisters, and one which ought to show you that your condition is far above that of great ladies of the world, for to be a Sister of Charity is to be a daughter of God."

Thus we see the nobility of character concealed under the humble dress of a Sister of Charity. Henceforth, when war, famine, and pestilence spread misery over the land, Saint Vincent de Paul had at his command an army of charity, which, if it did not completely destroy poverty and suffering, for they are inseparable from humanity, at least soothed the sufferer, and when even that could not be done, spread around him a perfume of resignation and of hope.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PRIESTS OF THE MISSION

1625-1642

IT is now time to fix our attention on that house of Saint-Lazare placed by God in the centre of Paris as a new source of life and light, the richest fountain in the seventeenth century of charity under all its aspects. At that time it stood in the wide space which separated Paris from Saint-Denis, but which is now a busy street. There, at No. 117, in what used to be a leper hospital, one of the most original and most courageous conceptions of Saint Vincent de Paul began to be realised, the Congregation of the Mission.

Its originality consisted in this, that it was the first and only company of priests in the Church entirely and exclusively devoted to the poor. This was Saint Vincent's idea from the beginning. Already he had founded associations of charity for men and women; he had taught the upper classes in Paris to serve the poor, and, above all, he had raised up the Sister of Charity, that visible incarnation of the virtue of charity. But all these great works, so necessary and so successful, had not turned away Saint Vincent for a moment from carrying out his original plan. Higher than the body was the soul; higher than to soothe physical suffering, though a most noble work, was to guard and save the souls of the poor, darkened by ignorance, and degraded by vice.

Not that there were not in the Church plenty of

religious orders who were labouring most earnestly and successfully. There were the Jesuits, but they occupied themselves most fruitfully with the upper classes. Again, there were the Dominicans, but they were the learned doctors who taught in the universities. There were also the Franciscans, especially the Capuchins, but they were doing so much good at the Sorbonne and other universities, that in the seventeenth century the poor were worse off than any class in point of instruction. Now it was to supply this want that Saint Vincent de Paul wished to raise up a body of priests entirely devoted to the service of the poor.

The idea was superb, well worthy of our saint, but how difficult to realise ! To apply priests, eminent men—for they should be such—simply and solely to educate the poor country-people ; to debar them from lecturing to learned audiences in the universities ; to forbid them preaching in the grand churches and cathedrals, and to confine them exclusively to the poor, dull, country-people—what a folly to attempt such a task, unless priests could be found whose humility was almost without measure.

“O gentlemen !” the saint frequently said to his first disciples, “the poor are our portion. *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*. What a blessing ! Gentlemen, what a blessing ! to do that which our Saviour has come upon earth to do, to continue the work of this God-Saviour, who forsook the cities to go to seek the poor in the rural districts—in a word, to aid the poor, our lords and masters, such is our mission.

“What ought to attach us very much to this mission is that it has been specially confided to us. As far as I know, no other body has proposed to itself as its principal object and end the evangelisation of the poor,

especially the most abandoned poor. O God! that there should be a Congregation, and this the Congregation of the Mission, composed of poor men, who, charged with this noble commission of going hither and thither, from village to village, forsake the cities—what was never done before—and fly to announce the Gospel to the poor alone; this is indeed wonderful, and yet it is our vocation.”<sup>1</sup>

But the more exalted was their mission and the more contrary to the inclinations of nature, the more he felt certain that his disciples should fail if he had not succeeded in establishing them in the profoundest humility. Hence he frequently told them that they were unworthy of their vocation, poor and ignorant like himself, and incapable of doing anything; that the Congregation was the least of all, and its members the most wretched both in quality and quantity. He spent fifty years of his life in preaching thus to his disciples, and in establishing them in humility which nothing would be able to shake. Devoted exclusively to the service of the poor, and hidden in the profoundest humility, the Congregation grew slowly. Saint Vincent began with a single priest, M. Portail, and in 1626 M. de la Salle and M. du Courdray joined, but for ten years after that the number did not reach thirty. In the eyes of the world the undertaking was a failure, but Saint Vincent did not lose courage.

It is true that those who came to enter were received by no means eagerly, and it required a special grace from God to persevere. When M. Almeras, that eminent man who succeeded Saint Vincent as Superior-General, presented himself for admission to the Congregation, the saint endeavoured to dissuade him.

<sup>1</sup> “Conferences.”



Already this young priest had had to listen to the objections of his relatives, who said: "What! going to join the Congregation of the Mission! It is composed merely of poor priests. You will die of weariness. Why not join the Jesuits or the Dominicans?" When he presented himself to Saint Vincent, almost the same sentiments were expressed by him. "O sir, do you wish to join us? Evidently you don't know us. We are only poor folk, not very sociable or polished, without much means or security, and obliged to go wherever obedience sends us." The saint then described their poverty and scanty furniture, which was enough to repel any one. But notwithstanding all that, M. Almeras was determined to enter, for, said he, a man who abandons the world and its pleasures, ought no longer to love anything but poverty, suffering and humiliation. He thought that a person who puts on the habit of a religious should desire or seek nothing else, and thus all Saint Vincent said to dissuade him only served to strengthen his resolution.<sup>1</sup>

What Saint Vincent said to young René Almeras he said to every one. From the way he spoke one might have thought the Congregation was composed of idiots, and that one should have lost one's mind to enter it. The saint spoke in this manner so frequently and with such sincerity that in the end Père de Con-dren began to believe him. "O M. Vincent," said he, "how happy is your Congregation to bear such marks of divine institution! For as when Jesus Christ founded His Church, He was pleased to select poor fishermen and sinners to spread His Gospel, in order the better to show forth His power, so in like manner in your Congregation most of its members are poor,

<sup>1</sup> Abelly.

of low birth or of little learning. And yet the whole kingdom is stirred by the spirit of your Company, and the late King even said that if he recovered he would not allow a bishop to be consecrated till he had spent three years with you."

The disciples of Saint Vincent were very far, however, from being so ignorant as the saint in his humility endeavoured to make people believe. "One day at an entertainment held in Clermont College one of the saint's disciples was present, and without intending it, took a higher place than was reserved for him. The rector sent a messenger to ask him to change. The priest replied in excellent Latin that he was very comfortable and preferred to remain where he was. The messenger, not understanding the Latin, returned to the rector, who came to the conclusion that the priest should either be an Irishman or a Pole, and sent another messenger, who asked him in Latin to move lower down. This time the priest replied in Greek. Then the professor of rhetoric approached, and to him he replied in Hebrew; till at last some one recognised who he was, and had him conducted to a seat among the most distinguished guests. When the priest returned to Saint-Lazare he related the joke, but Saint Vincent did not approve of it, saying: "A poor missionary should not seek high places in an assembly, nor speak of himself. I ask you, sir, to return and beg pardon of the rector for the disedification you have given." The priest willingly obeyed, and left as great an impression of his virtue as of his learning.<sup>1</sup>

Saint Vincent lost no opportunity of instilling into the minds of his disciples lowly sentiments and utter contempt for what the world most esteems.

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. ii.

M. du Coudray was well versed in the Syriac and Hebrew languages. It was proposed that he should render the Syriac version into Latin, and so reflect credit on the rising Congregation, while doing a service to the Church. It was also suggested that he should write against the Jews, and use the Talmud, which he understood better than themselves. M. du Coudray lent a willing ear to these suggestions, but before beginning he went to ask leave. "O sir," replied Saint Vincent, "I beg of you not to think of such a thing! That kind of work feeds the curiosity of the learned, but is of no use towards the salvation of the poor country-people, for whom especially God has destined us. There are millions of souls in France, sir, who hold out their hands and exclaim in the most touching manner: 'Alas, sir, you have been chosen by God to contribute to our salvation; have pity on us then, for we are buried in ignorance and sin. To relieve us we want neither Syriac nor Latin versions. Your own zeal and the coarse jargon of our mountains will suffice, without which we are in great danger of being lost.'"<sup>1</sup> These are admirable sentiments of Saint Vincent, but we must not conclude from them that he undervalued the place of science and learning in the Church. On the contrary, he felt the highest esteem, nay, the absolute necessity of it. But the object of his little Congregation was entirely different. There was no question of founding colleges or universities, there were plenty of them already; nor of giving to the Church learned doctors, for they abounded. No! what was urgently wanted were missionaries among the poor, apostles among the country-people.

While Saint Vincent was thus keeping prominently

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. i.

before his disciples the main end of the Congregation, he was also furnishing them with means to attain it. He laid it down as a first principle that his missionaries were not to preach in cities, but to confine themselves to the country districts. In vain did the most zealous bishops try to obtain a mission in their cities, and likewise in vain did even Louis XIII. and Anne of Austria endeavour to persuade our saint to send missionaries to Rheims and Metz. Saint Vincent humbly but resolutely answered that his missionaries were destined for the poor country-people, and that their first rule was not to preach in cities. "Oh!" replied the Queen, "I did not know that, and be assured I shall never ask them to act contrary to their rule."

The second rule was that the missions were to be given gratuitously, for the poor country curés were unable to pay; however, something might be taken if offered by the rich lords and gentry of the locality. The missionaries brought with them all the necessaries for a prolonged stay, and they might be seen in the mountains of Savoy bringing their bedding and provisions on mules, and lodging themselves in out-houses and barns. Their poverty and mortification edified the poor country-people, who were unaccustomed to such a spectacle. The missions were given always by two, sometimes three, and often even more priests, for Saint Vincent believed that one man, however eloquent, could not stir the people sufficiently, and for the same reason he instructed them to remain a month, or even two or three, in the same place. "Without a long and diligent sojourn," said the saint, "what are missions?—straw fires, a ray of light in darkness." While Saint Vincent was confining the attention of his missionaries to the poor, he was also teaching them to use simple, clear, practical language in their dis-

courses. With this in view, from the very beginning he reduced all his rules to what he called the Little Method, and this we must examine rather closely, for it was the great weapon of the missionaries, the lever by which they successfully moved their audience.

"This Little Method consists in going straight to the point of our discourse, without using language too high or too low, but such as is suited to our audience, and capable of being understood by the dumbest among them. It instructs, moves, deters from vice, inclines to virtue, and produces the most admirable effects everywhere it is employed. Behold in what our Little Method consists." The missionaries were to leave aside all the grandiloquence and erudition which encumbered the sermons of this period, and of which the people had neither need nor understanding.

The saint wished that they should go straight to the point, giving the reasons why such a truth should be believed or such a virtue practised ; in what such a truth or virtue consists, and the means of acquiring it. "It may all be reduced to this," said he. "Following this method, in the first place, we make evident the reasons and motives which can affect and move the soul to detest sin and vice, and to seek virtue. But it is not enough to announce to me the imperative obligations I am under of having a virtue, if I know not what that virtue is, nor in what it chiefly consists ; what are its works and its functions ? And there you have the second point effecting this ; for, according to our method, after the motives which should incline our hearts to virtue, we make apparent in the second place in what that virtue consists, what is its essence and its nature, what are its properties, what its functions, its acts and their opposites, the marks and the practice of this virtue. You draw



the curtain, and discover plainly the lustre and beauty of the same virtue, revealing simply, familiarly, and in particular, what it is, what acts should herein be practised, and descending always to particulars. 'I see now,' some one says, 'in what that virtue consists, the things with which it is concerned, and what are its acts; that is good and very necessary, but, sir, how difficult it is! and how can we acquire it? I know not what I am obliged to do for this, in what manner I should conduct myself therein; how should I attain this virtue though I know I have great need of it, and willingly would practise it if I had but the means?' Give this man the means for it (which is the third point of the Method), and behold he is satisfied."

Next Saint Vincent shows that this Little Method is easy, natural, and suitable to all occasions and circumstances. "When one would urge a man to become President, what is it he employs for that purpose? It is only necessary to present to him the advantages and the high honour which belong to that office. A President! Why, he is the chief man of the city; all yield to him the highest place and the footpath; there is no person who does not honour him; his authority gives him great credit with the world. O sir, a President! He yields not to a bishop: even sovereigns defer to them, and hold them in great reverence. A President! He can oblige, can do a favour when it seems fit to him, acquire many friends, make himself esteemed everywhere, &c. . . . And thus he is told the other advantages of being President; and immediately you see him burning with the desire of obtaining that high dignity. But is he satisfied with this? Not at all; you must proceed still. What is the office of President? in what does it consist? What are its duties? You are the chief officer of justice

of that high and honourable body ; you are its head ; you arrange the affairs ; it is you who receive the verdict from the others and who pronounce the sentence. This is nearly all they show him. Now here is a man who desires to obtain the office of President, and who knows already in what it consists ; but all this is to no purpose if the means of obtaining that post be not suggested to him. He would have cause of complaint against the meddler who should come to give him the desire of the office, without suggesting to him any means of getting it. If, however, he who supplies the advice gives also the means ! Sir, you have such an income from that quarter, and so much money from the other ; you shall draw from that place this sum, and from this place that other sum. For the rest, I know Mr. Such-a-one, who has that post to sell ; further, Mr. So-and-so is intimate with me, and also his friend. I'll manage that he shall negotiate with him, and then we can also do this, that, and the other. This is what is well calculated to put a man on the high-road to the Presidency. In all worldly matters, when we would persuade others, we lay down the means also ; and this is the most effectual course, and to which it is impossible not to conform, if we have common-sense. It is the same way in spiritual things."

Having shown in what the Little Method consists, and how natural it was, the saint proceeds to speak of its efficacy.

"A mission was given among the banditti, and these wretched persons were converted by the grace of God. A thing unheard of in our days ! Behold what it has pleased God to effect through this poor and lowly Congregation, preaching according to the Little Method. Is it not a fact, Mr. Martin ? We are here in familiar

conference ; tell us, if you please, how this has happened.

“*Mr. Martin.* Yes, sir, it is so ; in the villages where missions have been given, the banditti, like the others, have come to confession. This generally happens in our missions.

“*Saint Vincent.* Oh, miraculous event ! the banditti converted by sermons delivered in the Little Method.

“More recently,” continued the saint, “a mission was given in a certain seaport town. A ship was wrecked on the coast ; the merchandise and other things with which the vessel was freighted were cast on the shore. The whole town and its environs flocked together there, and seized on everything they could carry away. The mission having been given according to the Little Method, it caused restitution to be made to the poor merchants of what had been stolen. They determined to restore all. Some returned bales of goods, others pieces of cloth, sums of money ; and the rest, not having wherewith to make immediate restitution, bound themselves to do so afterwards. Behold, gentlemen, the effects of the Little Method. Find me a parallel to this in that far-fetched style, in that elaborate plan, and in that vain show of elocution. Hardly a single individual is known to be converted in many Advents and Lents by such preaching.

“Among ourselves, gentlemen, what success have you not had everywhere that you preached according to the Little Method ? What conversions have you not seen ? The man and woman who lived in infamy have come to you. ‘Ah ! sir,’ they say, ‘we abandon our wicked ways. From this moment we are separated for ever. I promise you I shall never see her again.’ Oh ! what is this ? What is this ? The animosities, the in-

veterate enmities for which it seemed there was no remedy, the greatest discords, have they not been appeased by the efficacy which God has given to your sermons, delivered according to the Little Method? O God! what fruit, what advancements have been produced everywhere, and how much greater would they be if I, wretch that I am, had not impeded them by my sins! O Saviour! forgive this miserable sinner who mars all your designs."

The pompous method, the saint used to say, not only produced no fruit, but injured those who used it by fostering thoughts of pride and vanity.

"What is the meaning of all this vain show? Is it the preacher's wish to prove that he is a great orator, a deep theologian? Strange thing! he takes a bad way of doing so. Perhaps he will be esteemed by some persons who know little about the matter; but to gain the esteem of the wise, and the reputation of being a very eloquent man, you must know the secret of enforcing that which you would wish your hearers to embrace, and of dissuading them from that which they are obliged to avoid. Now this does not consist in using choice words, in rounding your periods, in expressing in an uncommon manner subtle ideas, and in uttering your discourses in an elevated tone, like a declaimer, which passes over people's heads. Such preachers, can they obtain their ends? Do they forcibly persuade their audience to love piety? Are the people touched and moved to repentance? Far from it, far from it; and yet such are the pretensions of these orators: to acquire a reputation, to make people say: 'Really that man has a good delivery, he is truly eloquent, what fine ideas he has! and how beautifully he expresses them!' There is the whole fruit of their sermons. They go up then into the pulpit, not to preach

God, but themselves ; they employ (oh, what a crime !) a thing so holy as the Word of God to feed and pamper their own vanity. O Divine Saviour !

“ But it is said, this method is good no doubt, but there are others equally good. We see many learned and eminent preachers who are ignorant of our method, yet they fail not to produce great fruit and to preach very well. Undoubtedly, God uses what means He pleases to promote His glory ; He can make of these stones children to Abraham. But, with all that, how many conversions do we see by such methods ? We have experience of ours, but concerning these fashionable methods you have experience to the contrary. They pass lightly over, do nothing but graze, touch nothing but the surface, and make a little noise. What is all that in comparison to the fruit we see spring from our Little Method.

“ Be not under the impression, gentlemen, that this Little Method is only for the Congregation, for the vulgar, the peasantry ; it is, indeed, most excellent for the people, but it is also very efficacious for the most enlightened audience, for cities, even Paris. In the mission which was given at Saint-Germain, people hastened there from all parts, from all quarters of this great city ; people were there from all parishes, and persons of rank, even doctors of divinity. No sermons were preached to all that vast assembly except according to the Little Method. The Lord Bishop of Boulogne, who was the principal speaker, never had any other ; and what fruit did it not produce ? O God ! what fruit ! General confessions were made, just as in the villages, with great benediction. Now, God be praised ! were there ever seen so many converted by all those refined sermons ? These fly over the house-



tops. All the conversion made by them is that the audience say: 'Yes, this man has profound thoughts, he says fine things.'

"But let us say more: the Little Method is suited to the court; twice already has it appeared there, and let me say, it has been well received. The Lord Bishop of Alet was the principal speaker. By the grace of God all opposition was surmounted by the Little Method, and the second time, when one of our priests, M. Luytre, spoke, thanks be to God! there was no opposition. O wretch that I am! I dare to say it, the Little Method was triumphant there.

"I think, therefore, there is nothing to prevent us from adopting this method of preaching. Is it the pleasure? But this enables us to preach with more satisfaction than all other methods. What greater pleasure in effect can a preacher have than to see his audience come to him in tears, as has happened often to yourselves? Is it not true that often you see your audience weep, and that when you would retire, it is necessary for you to steal away, since they run after you? Is it not true, gentlemen? Tell us, I beseech you, why this happens, and if it be not so? Yes, sir, a person knows not how to depart in order to escape from the crowd. O Saviour! they give us the same praise that they gave to Jesus Christ. 'Happy,' they say to the missionaries, 'the wombs that bore you!' When the missionaries depart they cry after them: 'Happy the breasts that gave you suck!' What more have they said of the Son of God? They address all these praises, and much more that would be tedious to relate, to the missionaries, but only when they use the Little Method.

"But this method is low! What will be said of me for always preaching in the same manner? What shall

I be taken for? Every one shall despise me, I shall lose my character. . . . You shall lose your character! Oh! in preaching as Jesus Christ you shall lose your reputation! What! to speak of God as the Son of God spoke of Him is to lose one's reputation! Oh! Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father, had then no reputation! Oh, what a blasphemy! One day I asked M. N——: 'Tell me, sir, if you please, how acted Saint Vincent Ferrer, who converted so many persons, and who attracted crowds from all parts, so that a convoy of provisions had to attend him?' He answered me: 'It is so; that illustrious saint preached in simplicity, familiarly, making himself well understood by all.' O simplicity, thou art all-persuasive! Long live simplicity, which converts all; long live the Little Method, which is the most excellent, and by which we can acquire more honour, convincing the understanding, without all that clamour which does nothing but weary the audience. O gentlemen! so true is this, that if a man would pass for a good preacher in the churches of Paris, and at court, it is necessary for him to preach thus, and with no airs. Of such a preacher it is said: this man does wonders; he preaches in missionary style, he preaches apostolically. To preach well, they say, it is necessary to preach as we do, and M. N—— told me that in the end it should come to this. O my God! Thou hast given then this grace to the little and despicable Congregation, to inspire a method which all would fain follow; we return Thee thanks for it with all our strength."<sup>1</sup>

Thus it was that Saint Vincent stigmatised false eloquence, and prepared the way for the simple, natural, and convincing style of oratory, of which Bossuet is the grand model.

<sup>1</sup> "Conferences."

The saint was equally anxious that the catechetical instructions should be most carefully attended to. "All are agreed that the fruit of a mission depends on these instructions. A person of quality told me lately that our missionaries prepare their sermons well, but not the instructions. In the name of God, sir, let this fact be known in your house." This defect was quickly seen to in Saint-Lazare. Lessons were given to the young students, and henceforth they went on the missions well prepared to give these instructions. They assembled the children of the parish, carefully instructed them, and at the end of the mission they all made their first communion.

The mission usually concluded with the erection of the Association of Charity, either for the men or women of the parish. Saint Vincent wished that the missionaries should found this association, even in the smallest parish, for he believed it was the best means of preserving the fruits of a mission.

Labours so wisely carried out by men so humble and devoted to the poor, could not but excite widespread admiration. As the saint himself bears testimony, the people followed the missionaries, and in some cases it was necessary even to depart by night to escape an ovation. Protestants were also converted in great numbers; for Saint Vincent strongly impressed upon his missionaries that charity was to be their only weapon, that they should attack the error, but not the person, and that in troubled times they should never even allude to politics—wise counsel and suitable for all times.

Among the missions of this period none caused greater commotion than the one given in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. The court was there at the time, and for that

reason Saint Vincent, always an enemy of display, wished that the mission should be given by others. Louis XIII. expressed a command, and thus left no option to our saint. The ladies attached to the court attended, and all were struck with the simplicity and humility of the missionaries, especially in their preaching.

"The mission of Saint-Germain," writes Saint Vincent, "ended most successfully, though in the beginning there were some difficulties. The King told M. Pavillon that he was thoroughly satisfied. Those who at first created the opposition, afterwards became the most fervent."

At the conclusion of a mission it often happened that, in order to maintain the good effects produced, the lord of the manor offered Saint Vincent a site for one of his houses, and others guaranteed annuities. Thus almost every year a new house was established: Toul in 1635; La Rose in 1637; Richelieu, Luçon, and Troy in 1638; Annecy in 1639; Crécy in 1641; Rome in 1642; Marseilles, Cahors, Sedan, and Montmirail in 1643, &c. It is interesting to read Saint Vincent's letters in connection with the establishment of a new house, and to notice how carefully he wishes the future to be provided for, how the contract should be well made, and the building itself and ground attached to it be in good order. Saint Vincent dealt with every matter as a man of experience. What is particularly striking is the care he took to select a good superior for each new house, and the admirable directions he gave him. But of this we shall speak later on.

Saint Vincent ardently desired that his Congregation should be approved by the King and the Pope. M. de Gondi was commissioned to arrange the matter with the

former, and obtained letters-patent from Louis XIII., but in consequence of certain intrigues, Parliament did not ratify them for four years afterwards—1631. M. du Coudray, one of our saint's first disciples, was sent to Rome, but here also difficulties had to be overcome.

The constitution of the new Congregation presented this difficulty, that its members were not to be bound by solemn vows, and this was altogether a new departure. Simple vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability in the Congregation were merely required. In the opinion of theologians this did not constitute the members of the Congregation of the Mission religious, and this was what Saint Vincent de Paul intended. His priests were to wear the ordinary soutane; they were not to be bound to chant the divine office, or to any particular penances, but merely those fasts prescribed by the Church on all the faithful. On the other hand, they were required to practise complete separation from the world, a life of humility, mortification, and devotedness to the poor. All this was quite a new and bold step, and raised for a time, at least, much opposition in Rome.

"O sir!" writes Saint Vincent to M. du Coudray, "I am greatly astonished at what you tell me, but I fear only my own sins, for sooner or later our plan will succeed."

To those who said there was no need of any more missionaries, the saint replied: "Alas! the country is large, and there are thousands perishing. All the secular and religious bodies are not enough to meet this misfortune. If we are prevented from coming to the aid of those poor people, we must only pray and do penance for our sins."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Letters," vol. i. p. 65.



Ultimately, Alexander VII. summoned the cause to his own tribunal, and having had it carefully examined by a commission composed of cardinals, published the brief of approbation on September 22, 1655.

Having thus secured the future of his Congregation by this double approbation of the Pope and the King, Saint Vincent next set about establishing a regular novitiate, where those who aspired to join might test their vocation in solitude and silence, and under wise directors.

Not all who entered the seminary—for so the saint wished it to be called rather than the novitiate—were destined for the ecclesiastical state. There were also lay-brothers, who took the same vows and had the same spiritual exercises as the others, but whose duty it was to do manual work, and to assist the priests in this way on the missions.

Saint Vincent placed M. de la Salle at the head of the seminary, and gave him instructions which to this day have remained the rule of conduct of the Priests of the Mission. They are reduced to three points, and it is difficult to know what to admire most.

1. Never ask any one to enter the Congregation.

“Ah! gentlemen, be on your guard, when you meet those who come here to make a retreat, never to say anything which might induce them to enter the Company. It is for God to call them, and to give them the first thought of doing so. Even when they tell you they have an idea of joining, don’t take it upon yourselves to decide for them, but exhort them to think the matter over, to frequently ask God for light in prayer, for it is a most important step. Represent to them the difficulties which they shall have according to nature, that they should be slow in making up their minds, and be ready

to suffer and labour much for God. After this, if they still continue in their resolution, let them confer with the Superior about their vocation. Leave God to act, gentlemen, and let you humbly, patiently, and with the greatest submission, await the orders of Divine Providence. Believe me, if the Company acts thus, God will bless it."

2. Never retain any one who wishes to leave.

"If you see," the saint continues, "that they wish to go elsewhere, and to serve God in some other order or community, O God, do not prevent them! otherwise we might justly fear the indignation of God. Tell me, I beg of you, if the Company had not acted in this spirit up to the present, would the Carthusians and other communities have sent so many young men to make a retreat here when they asked to join them? A young man who wishes to become a Carthusian is sent here to learn God's will in the spiritual exercises of a retreat, and you endeavour to persuade him to remain here! What else is such conduct, gentlemen, but to wish to retain a person in a Congregation to which God does not call him, and for which even he himself has no desire. Would not this be sufficient to bring down the wrath of God on the Company? O poor Congregation of the Mission, what a pitiable state you should fall to, if you came to this! But with the help of God, you have in the past, and will in the future, keep far from such a degradation."

3. This was not enough: if a person decided to abandon the world, and was hesitating about the choice of a community, he should be urged to join the most fervent. If he selected the Congregation, Saint Vincent exclaimed: "O sir, we are only poor folk, not to be

compared with other holy communities ! Go to one of them, you will be incomparably better off there than with us." This certainly is divine ; here we feel the Spirit of God.

Such sentiments, far from repelling them, only served to attract noble souls, and soon the seminary was not able to contain all that applied to be admitted. Now that he had obtained the approbation of the Congregation, and provided it with a seminary to recruit new members, Saint Vincent thought he might retire. Of what use was he ? He was only an obstacle, by the number and enormity of his sins, as he used to say. He resolved, then, to resign. With this in view, he convened a general assembly on October 13, 1642. Almost all the Superiors were there. Before the whole assembly the saint went on his knees, and having asked pardon for all the scandal which he had given, he tendered his resignation, and begged them to elect his successor. He immediately left the room, merely saying that he ratified beforehand their election, and that he would obey, just as the least among them, the new Superior-General.

The first impression of all present was of admiration and astonishment. When they came to themselves again, some went out to find Saint Vincent, and beg of him to return and resume his place at their head. The saint was found prostrate in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, begging of God to enlighten the assembly in its choice of a new Superior. When he was told the decision, he remained for a moment motionless, and then turning round, said, "I am no longer Superior, let them nominate another."

When this answer reached the assembly, the whole body rose and went to where our saint was kneeling.

As they approached they heard the humble remonstrances of the Father to the tender and respectful solicitations of his children. Seeing the saint determined, the missionaries at last said, "Do you absolutely wish us then to proceed to elect a Superior?"—"That is your duty, and I conjure you to do it."—"Very well then, we will do so." In a short time they returned and announced to him that they had re-elected him for life, and would always do so, as long as God preserved him. Saint Vincent was, so to speak, caught in his own trap. He tried to disengage himself, but seeing all his efforts useless, he submitted.

"At least, gentlemen and my brothers," he said, "pray for this miserable wretch! This is the greatest act of obedience I can perform." Then the missionaries renewed their vow of obedience, and testified their gratitude towards him.<sup>1</sup>

Scarcely elected, Saint Vincent profited by the presence of so many Superiors to confer with them upon certain measures till then not definitely decided. "We have just held an assembly," he writes, "in which we examined the rules which we had prepared, settled upon the principal ones, and deputed Messrs. Portail, Du Coudray, Horgny, and Lambert, to examine and decide on the rest. We have given the order which should be followed at the General Assemblies, and settled what remained to be fixed in the Company. I shall send you all this that you may give us your opinion upon it. We have introduced nothing, or very little that is new, except to give Assistants to the General; so that I am now ready to die, when it shall please God."<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately his hour had not yet come. Although in his sixty-sixth year, he had still eighteen more to live,

<sup>1</sup> Maynard, vol. i. p. 387.  
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<sup>2</sup> "Letters," vol. i. p. 425.  
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and those were destined to be the most active and fruitful years of his extraordinary life. Free on the side of his Congregation, with four great armies of charity at his command, and wearing on his brow an ever-increasing aureola of sanctity, we shall see Saint Vincent de Paul battle against misery, which every day assumed greater proportions, and triumph over it, at least as far as possible here below, especially in those sad times when it is aggravated by war, famine, and pestilence.

END OF VOL. I.

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